

BBC

SINGING THROUGH THE BLITZ

Why Britons fell in love with opera during WWII



HISTORY

MAGAZINE

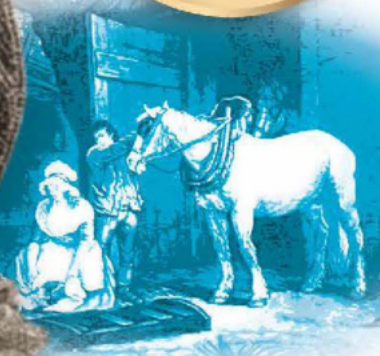
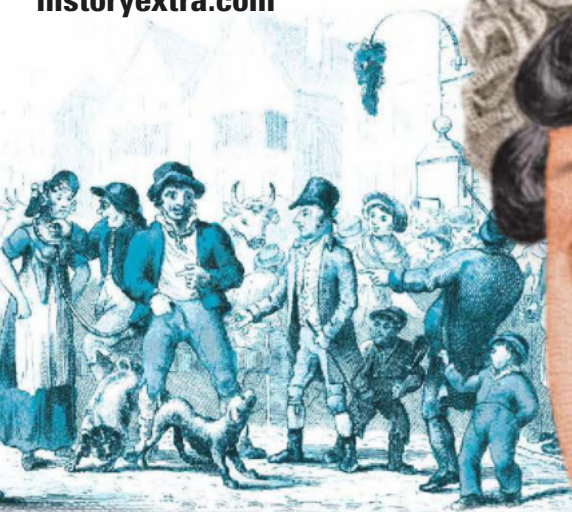
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Christmas 2025

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Jane Austen's Regency revelations

How her novels expose a darker side to Georgian Britain

Terror in the deep

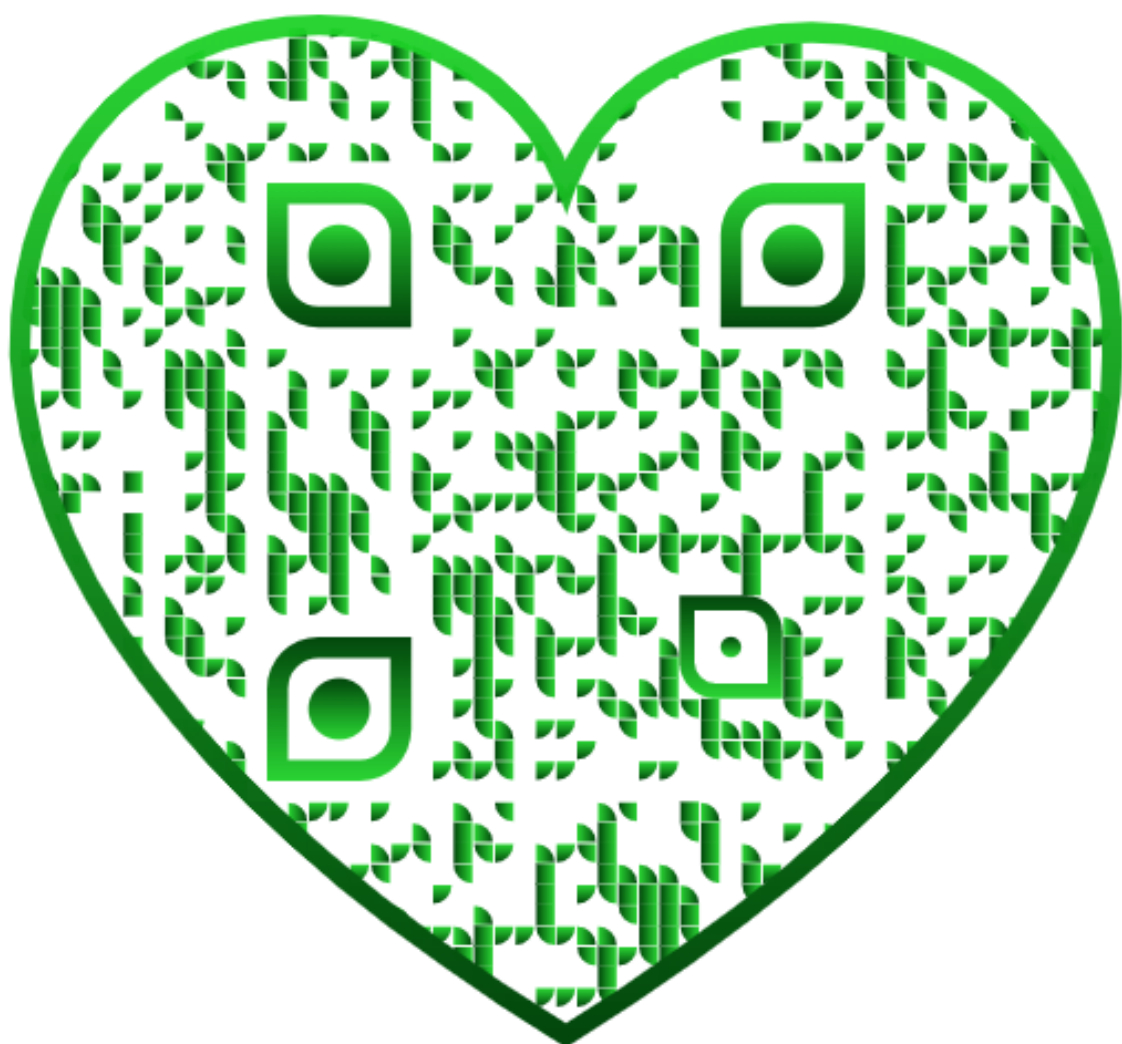
Five fearsome sea
monsters from history

Father Christmas v Santa Claus

The centuries-long battle
for Britain's chimneys

Murder most female

Could Victorian women really
have committed these crimes?





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CENSUS, ENGLAND, 1921.

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This space is to be filled in by the Enumerator.

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Name of person responsible for making the return.

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Name and Surname.

Eith Wilson

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WELCOME

CHRISTMAS 2025

BBC HISTORY MAGAZINE

SPECIAL INTEREST
BRAND OF THE YEAR
AWARDS

“Every Christmas morning my kids thunder down the stairs, desperate to see what new toys have magically arrived for them in the night. But who exactly is the mysterious gift giver? In our house it’s always been **Father Christmas**, but in yours it might be **Santa Claus**, or perhaps a blending of the two. So how have these two festive favourites come to compete for our attentions at this time of the year? One man who has the answer is the historian Thomas Ruys Smith, and in his feature this month he charts a centuries-long, transatlantic tale, with conclusions that might well surprise you. You’ll find it on page 34.

For our cover feature this month we’re revisiting **the works of Jane Austen** as we approach the 250th anniversary of her birth. Such is the ubiquity of her novels that it’s hard not to view the late Georgian era at least partly through the prism of her words. Of course, her focus tended to be on certain sections of that society but, as Lizzie Rogers explains, she left plenty of hints as to **some of the wider currents shaping Britain at the time**. Turn to page 20 for the full story.

The Second World War transformed this country in numerous ways, and we’ve explored many of those changes in this magazine over the years. One aspect that I wasn’t aware of, though, was how the conflict **sparked a craze for opera among soldiers and civilians alike**. In Alexandra Wilson’s fascinating article, on page 54, she takes us back to a time when “tram drivers tuned in to Tchaikovsky and waitresses revelled in Wagner”.

I hope you enjoy the issue and I wish you all a very happy Christmas.

Rob Attar

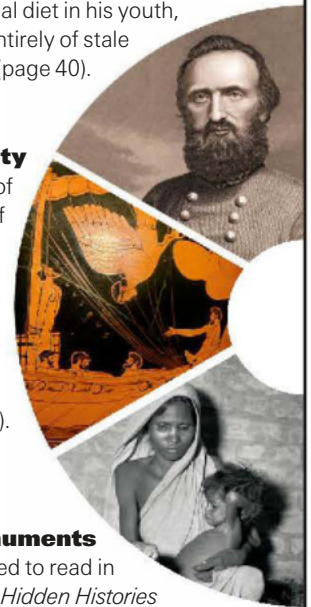
Editor



THREE THINGS I’VE LEARNED THIS MONTH

1. Bread for war

In this month’s Q&A, I was intrigued to read that the famed Confederate general Stonewall Jackson adopted a highly unusual diet in his youth, consisting almost entirely of stale bread (page 40).



2. Brains before beauty

Prema Arasu’s history of sea monsters is full of fascinating details, such as the fact that in Homer’s *Odyssey* the sirens tempt the sailors with the promise of knowledge rather than their alluring forms (page 49).

3. Missing monuments

I was surprised to read in Kavita Puri’s *Hidden Histories* column that, despite the scale of the losses, there is no memorial to the 1943 Bengal Famine anywhere in the world (page 16).

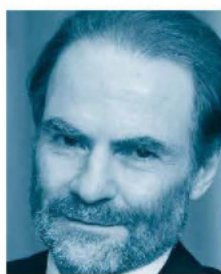
THIS ISSUE’S CONTRIBUTORS



Prema Arasu

“Monsters, when studied as historical artefacts, tell us about the cultures from which they come: their fears, their anxieties and their attitudes towards the natural world.”

Prema charts humanity’s enduring obsession with five sea monsters, on page 46



Timothy Garton Ash

“Authoritarian regimes fear protest because it allows people to speak and find their voice. The pivotal moment is breaking that barrier of fear.”

Timothy discusses the history of political protest, on page 9



Lizzie Rogers

“Reading Jane Austen’s novels sparked my fascination for the 18th and early 19th centuries, and how women found their place in this changing world.”

Lizzie explores what the novelist’s works can tell us about life in Regency Britain, on page 20



Thomas Ruys Smith

“While researching the cultural history of Santa Claus I soon came to realise that his rivalry with Father Christmas for control of Britain’s stockings was a contest with surprisingly deep roots.”

Thomas chronicles the historical battle between two icons of the festive period, on page 34

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Are they rivals for our Yuletide affection, or two sides of the same character?

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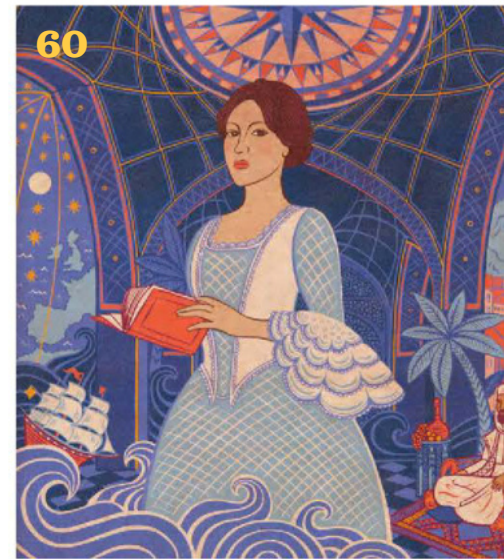
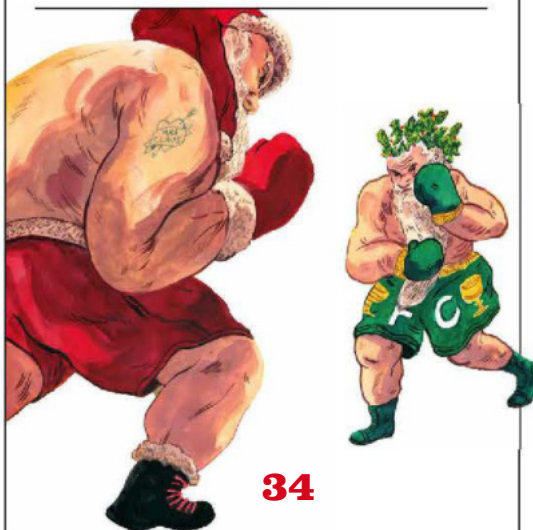
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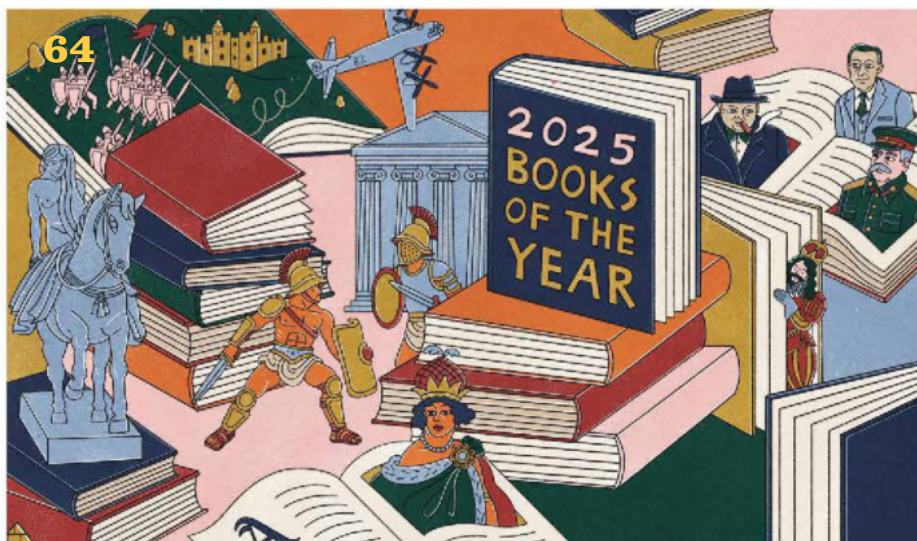
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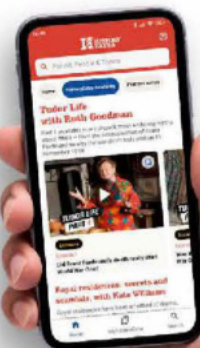
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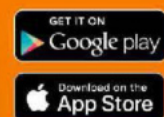
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ANNIVERSARIES

DANNY BIRD highlights events that took place around Christmas in history

29 DECEMBER 1170

Thomas Becket is murdered in Canterbury

Knights loyal to Henry II rid him of the "low-born cleric"

The chanting of vespers had barely begun when four knights clattered into Canterbury Cathedral, swords unsheathed. "Where is Thomas Becket, traitor to the king and the kingdom?" they cried. There he stood, defenceless.

The cleric, once Henry II's trusted lord chancellor, had become archbishop of Canterbury in 1162, devoting himself to defending the church's independence. Accused of corruption and contempt for the king, in 1164 Becket fled to France, where he was protected by Louis VII. Finally, Pope Alexander III brokered a reconciliation, and Becket returned to England in late 1170 – though not before performing an act that reignited the feud.

Earlier that year, in a bid to secure the succession, Henry had had his son crowned. By tradition, only the archbishop of Canterbury could perform the coronation – but in Becket's absence the ceremony was conducted by the archbishop of York and the bishops of London and Salisbury. Becket excommunicated all three. Enraged, Henry declared his court full of "miserable curs and traitors", and that he was mocked by a "low-born priest".

Hearing those words, Reginald FitzUrse, William de Tracy, Hugh de Morville and Richard le Bret journeyed to Canterbury. On 29 December, they found Becket in the cathedral – and one of them hacked open Becket's skull.

In 1173, Pope Alexander III canonised the assassinated archbishop. His shrine became one of Europe's most important pilgrimage sites.

A 15th-century illustration depicts the martyrdom of Thomas Becket



GETTY IMAGES/BRIDGEMAN/ALAMY



A model of the UFO allegedly encountered by US Air Force personnel in Rendlesham Forest, Suffolk in 1980



26 DECEMBER 1980

In the early hours, US Air Force personnel at RAF Woodbridge in Suffolk report flashing lights and a **glowing metallic object in Rendlesham Forest**, sparking an investigation. Press dub the incident "Britain's Roswell".



A colourised 17th-century German woodcut of the "terrible comet". Edmond Halley's prediction of the return of the comet later named for him was validated in 1758

25 DECEMBER 1758

Halley's Comet appears, proving Edmond right

A German farmer's telescopic observation corroborates prediction of its return

On Christmas night, Johann Georg Palitzsch was peering through his telescope at a particular spot in the sky over Dresden. Just then, a faint, gleaming streak came into focus. A long-awaited visitor, foretold decades earlier by the great astronomer Edmond Halley, had returned.

Palitzsch, a farmer with a passion for astronomy, had become the first person to validate Halley's prediction. The comet was not a disturbance in the atmosphere, as Aristotle had claimed, nor a random wanderer. Its appearance confirmed that Newton's laws of motion and gravitation applied not only to planets but also to these icy voyagers from the distant reaches of the Solar System.

In 1705, having scoured records spanning centuries, Halley had recognised the ghostly visits of 1531, 1607 and 1682 as a single celestial body on a roughly 76-year orbit. His audacious forecast of its return in 1758 was met with scepticism. And, given that he was already 48 at the time, it was almost impossible he would live to see his prediction tested.

The comet, which is now named for Halley, had been observed for millennia, recorded in ancient China and immortalised in the Bayeux Tapestry, its visits mesmerising and terrifying generations. Across centuries, humans had marvelled at the appearance of such 'tailed stars', fearing them as omens of war, plague or disaster. Now, though, Palitzsch's observation relegated long-held superstitions to the waste-basket, and provided the first triumphant proof of predictable cometary motion.

The universe, vast and mysterious, began to seem comprehensible and measurable – yet far more extraordinary than the fanciful ponderings of countless witnesses since before the dawn of civilisation. **H**

Danny Bird is content producer on BBC History Magazine

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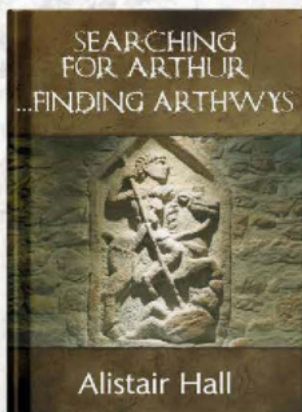
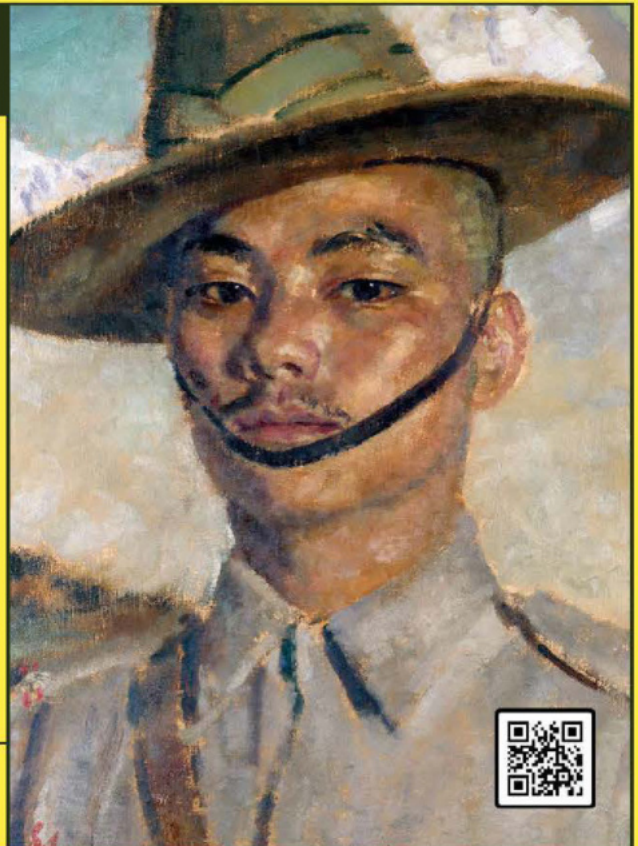
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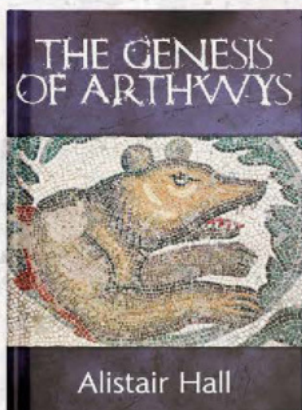
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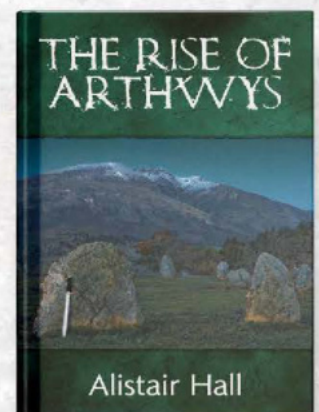
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If the Matter of Britain is given a sensible timeline and fair consideration it is apparent that there was a proto-Arthur...

Whilst the Romans were struggling to contain the barbarians in the mid fifth-century a great grandson of Coel Hen (Old King Cole) brought the army of the north to the Midlands and combining first with Vortimer and subsequently Riothamus engaged the Saxons, who under Hengist had annexed almost the entire province of Flavia Caesariensis (Lincolnshire). *Searching for Arthur... Finding Arthwys* explores how the nascent kingdoms of the north are the source of the legends of King Arthur and explains how subsequent interpretations have misplaced these events and obscured their significance to the history of the Britons.

Alternatively, if you prefer your history fictionalised and garnished with legend read *The Genesis of Arthwys* and *The Rise of Arthwys* by Alistair Hall, both epic realisations of the brutal fifth century which tell the stories of the descendants of Coel Hen who after the withdrawal of the Romans stepped forward with their contemporaries to defend their homeland culminating in the defeat of the Saxons at the Battle of Mount Badon.

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THE CONVERSATION

EXPERTS DEBATE HISTORY'S BIGGEST ISSUES



ILLUSTRATION BY **HUGH COWLING**

BIG QUESTIONS

“Protests are political theatre,
and public squares are
their grand stages”

With the police about to be given broader powers to tackle disruptive events, the right to protest is in the spotlight. **TIMOTHY GARTON ASH** and **KATRINA NAVICKAS** join Danny Bird to discuss the history of popular demonstrations

THE PANEL

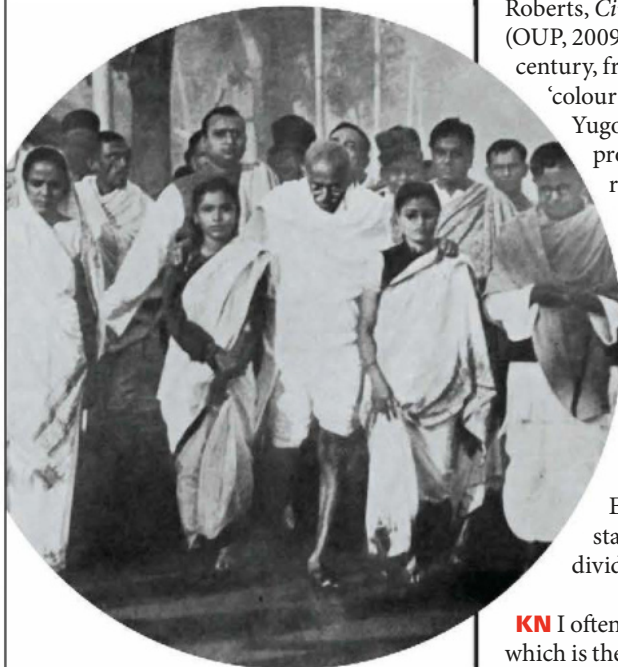
**Timothy Garton Ash**

is Isaiah Berlin professorial fellow and professor of European studies at St Antony's College, University of Oxford. His latest book is *Homelands: A Personal History of Europe* (Bodley Head, 2023)

**Katrina Navickas**

is professor of history at the University of Hertfordshire. Her books include *Contested Commons: A History of Protest and Public Space in England* (Reaktion, 2025)

Peaceful protest Mahātmā Gandhi – shown on a peace march in 1947 during the partition of India – used nonviolent resistance to campaign for Indian independence and the end of British rule



Danny Bird What is a protest? What distinguishes it from a riot or a revolution?

Katrina Navickas A protest is often defined by law, making it a fluid and changeable term. In England and Wales, its meaning has evolved over time. The earliest legal definition dates to the 1714 Riot Act, which distinguished a riot from other forms of protest. The modern idea of a demonstration emerged in the 19th century alongside the rise of democratic movements. Protest came to mean people gathering publicly to make collective claims – a reflection of the growing concept of ‘the people’ and their role in politics. However, what counts as a protest still depends on context: the country, the circumstances and the legal boundaries of what is permitted in public spaces.

Timothy Garton Ash Historically, revolution was associated with violence, but modern protest is defined by nonviolent action. Think of Gandhi in India, the Civil Rights movement in the US, or People Power in the Philippines [in 1986, resulting in the overthrow of the Marcos regime]. The revolutionary events of 1989 in eastern Europe were particularly notable because they brought together nonviolence and revolution for the first time. In essence, protest is about people power – collective, peaceful demonstration as a means of change.

What makes a protest ultimately successful? Is it timing, tactics, leadership or something peculiar to a moment in history?

TGA In the book I co-edited with Adam Roberts, *Civil Resistance and Power Politics* (OUP, 2009), we examined 18 cases over a century, from Gandhi to the more recent ‘colour revolutions’ in former Soviet and Yugoslav republics. One point is clear: protest alone is never enough. It requires favourable internal and external conditions to succeed.

For example, the 1989 revolutions succeeded where many Arab Spring protests did not because their surrounding circumstances were vastly different. Successful movements also have a clear strategy and they’re not merely expressions of anger or moral outrage. Effective protest involves understanding how to influence and divide those in power.

KN I often refer to the idea of critical mass, which is the point a movement gains enough



public support to create real momentum. That usually depends on an ideological or belief shift, as well as favourable conditions. Successful protests often arise when the state is weakened – for instance, after wars or during major economic crises – creating opportunities to mobilise support. At such times, the forces of law and order may also be less capable of suppressing dissent. Even the strongest movement needs both structural openings and a sense among people that success is possible.

Why does protest continue to make societies uneasy even in countries that pride themselves on free expression?

KN In Britain’s case, particularly in England and Wales, there was no statutory right to assembly or free speech until the Human Rights Act of 1998. Until then, the right to protest was effectively permissive rather than guaranteed.

Throughout the 20th century, much of the legislation was designed to manage the far right and other regressive forces, which created tensions around freedom of speech and assembly. A key example came in 1936, with debates over whether Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists should be allowed to march. Questions arose over who could prevent such meetings, particularly those held in private venues,



Protests that changed the world

Hear more from this conversation about the history of protest on our podcast: historyextra.com/podcast



Light in the darkness
A candlelit mass protest in Leipzig in November 1989. The Monday Demonstrations, as these nonviolent gatherings were known, played a crucial role in ending the rule of communism in East Germany

and whether police had the authority to intervene based on what was said. These tensions persist today: the balance between protecting free expression and preventing disorder remains delicate.

TGA Even in the freest societies, freedom is never unlimited. The freedoms of speech and assembly are constrained; if they were not, we would encounter philosopher Karl Popper's paradox of tolerance, where unlimited tolerance can ultimately destroy tolerance itself by empowering the enemies of democracy.

In authoritarian regimes, the issue is simpler: governments fear protest because it allows people to speak and find their voice. The pivotal moment is breaking that barrier of fear. For instance, in autumn 1989 in Leipzig, two friends attended a demonstration against the East German regime. As they walked, more people joined at each street corner... 10, 12, 200, then 1,000. This 'cascade effect' demonstrates how critical mass can overcome fear, a prospect that terrifies authoritarian rulers: consider Romanian president Nicolae Ceauşescu's facial expression when he realised that the crowd was openly booing him on 21 December 1989.

How fair is it to say Britain's history is one of evolution rather than revolution?

KN I often blame the Victorians for the myth of steady, moderate progress. The story of peaceful reform in Britain ignored harsh realities faced elsewhere. For a long time, for instance, Ireland was treated as a testing ground for extreme policing, public order measures and restrictions on constitutional rights. Even within Britain itself, progress was rarely smooth.

TGA Protest always involves risk – putting your body in situations where you might be attacked or, in extreme cases, killed. Some-

times, violence from the state backfires, galvanising wider support. The Tolpuddle Martyrs and, in Ireland, the Bloody Sunday massacres both illustrate this.

How has protest been legislated and policed throughout history?

KN In Britain, general public order legislation arrived relatively late. Historically, most laws targeted specific political or social movements rather than applying broadly. In the 19th century, measures focused on the Chartists, trade unions or suffragettes. Even in the 20th century, legislation was often aimed at particular crises: the 1936 laws addressed fascist and communist unrest in the East End of London, while measures in 1986 targeted striking miners or football hooligans. Recent legislation, including that of 2022–23, is broader in scope, but it still arises in reaction to specific groups dominating public attention – for example environmental and black rights movements. This reactive approach represents a continuity throughout British history.

TGA Authoritarian governments can invent almost any justification to suppress protest. In democracies, the situation depends on whether constitutional protections exist. In the US, the First Amendment protects free speech; in Germany, experience with two dictatorships has led to clear constitutional guarantees of assembly. The UK has no written constitution. Over the past 30 years, piecemeal legislation, often poorly drafted and confusing, has slowly restricted protest.

How do the spaces in which protest occurs help to shape it?

KN All protest is, at its core, a claim to public space. Demonstrations are associated with squares, streets and civic areas – town halls, county halls and other symbolic sites. Protesters assert their presence as 'the public' within these spaces, often choosing locations of national significance such as Trafalgar Square, built between the 1820s and 1840s and long regarded as Britain's foremost public space.

Throughout history, protesters have deliberately occupied symbolic sites to challenge authority or reshape public narratives. In London, battles over access to Hyde Park were especially significant. Although political gatherings were banned there because it was a royal park, the Reform League's demonstrations of the 1860s, in which supporters tore down fences to enter, forced change. Speaker's Corner

// There is enduring value in seeing oneself as 'the people' and recognising the power of collective action //

KATRINA NAVICKAS

emerged from this as a legal compromise established by the 1872 Parks Regulation Act, designating a specific area where people could speak freely without permission.

Even modern tactics, such as 'locking on', have historical roots: suffragettes chained themselves to the gates of Downing Street to demand visibility and access. From the 18th century to the present day, controlling the geography of protest has remained central to how the state manages dissent.

TGA Protests are also a form of political theatre, and public squares are their grand stages. Consider Tiananmen Square, the focal point of the Chinese protests in 1989. Or Wenceslas Square in Prague during the Velvet Revolution that same year, where 300,000 people gathered under the direction of Václav Havel – an actual dramatist turned leader – shaking their keys in unison to create an unforgettable sound.

Similarly, Ukraine's great protests have centred on the Maidan, Kyiv's central square, during the Orange Revolution of 2004–05 and again in the Revolution of Dignity in 2014–15, when it became known as the Euromaidan. In each case, the physical setting of the central square of the capital has been vital to the drama and symbolism of protest.

The suffragettes, who used violent tactics, are often lauded for having been on the 'right side' of history. What does this say about the way historical protests are perceived by posterity?

KN Groups such as the East London Federation of Suffragettes carried out more spectacular actions when moderate, peaceful wings were failing to make progress. This tactical shift in the early 1900s was also highly media-savvy. The suffragettes understood early mass media, staging stunts designed to capture newspaper front pages. Other actions targeted politicians or property: Winston Churchill, post boxes, shops.

Because the suffragettes ultimately succeeded, their militancy is incorporated into the national narrative as justified. Movements using similar tactics that fail rarely achieve such recognition; the losers are often excluded from stories of national progress. History can move backwards as well as forwards, but there is a tendency to view the British story as progressive, where 'winners' are celebrated and 'losers' forgotten. This explains why suffragette militancy is accepted, while comparable violence – for example, during Irish campaigns for independence – is not seen as necessary.

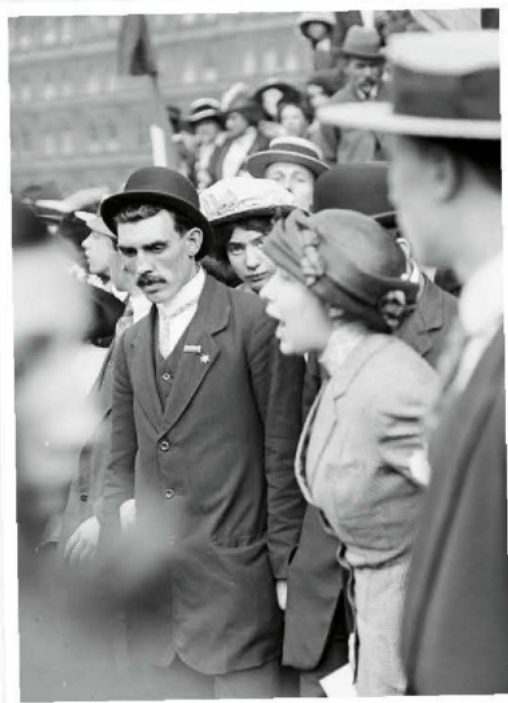


TGA So-called 'freedom fighters' who take up arms for independence are often celebrated as heroes if they succeed. History tends to memorialise those who eventually win, often decades after the events. An example is Oxford's Martyrs' Memorial, commemorating Protestant bishops who paid the ultimate price during the reign of 'Bloody' Mary and were celebrated only once their cause prevailed. In Czechoslovakia, the brave student Jan Palach set himself on fire in 1969 to protest the Soviet invasion. Today, Jan Palach Square commemorates his sacrifice – a recognition that would not have been possible if the country had remained under Soviet control.

There is a particular category of hero here: the martyr, someone who literally gives their life for a cause. Such figures occupy a special place in these narratives, because their extraordinary courage and ultimate sacrifice have universal resonance.

How important has social class been in the history of protest?

KN When asked about the most successful protests or campaigns, examples often include the abolition of slavery and the



Making headlines Sylvia Pankhurst addresses a meeting of suffragettes in July 1913. The group made smart use of the mass media



Orange Revolution Supporters of the opposition presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko rally at the Maidan Nezalezhnosti in Kyiv in November 2004, after the election run-off was thought to be rigged against him

repeal of the Corn Laws in the 19th century. These movements were largely led by well-connected, relatively wealthy men and women who could exert influence in parliament. Their campaigns were single-issue, respectable, and financially supported, which allowed them to achieve legislative change.

By contrast, working-class movements faced a far longer struggle to have their voices heard. Strict class hierarchies and limited resources made it harder to fund campaigns, influence policymakers, or sustain pressure. Yet, despite these constraints, working-class activists often achieved remarkable results with far fewer means than their wealthier counterparts, making their accomplishments all the more significant.

TGA Some protest movements are class-based, with the labour movement being the clearest example. However, protests tend to succeed most when they cross class boundaries and unite different parts of

People power 'Solidarity' banners being waved during a visit of Pope John Paul II to Poland. The pontiff's numerous visits to his home country from 1979 onwards galvanised support to overturn communist rule



society, because rulers often employ a divide-and-rule strategy. A striking example is the Solidarity movement in Poland during the 1980s. This decade-long mass popular movement succeeded precisely because it united intelligentsia, workers and peasants.

KN This also marks a key difference in 20th century protests. In Britain and Ireland prior to the 1960s, movements were largely class-based, with the labour movement being the strongest. But protests then increasingly took the form of amorphous social movements, not tied to traditional party or trade union structures. These movements sought to connect local struggles with global causes such as environmental campaigns, the anti-Vietnam War movement, peace initiatives and anti-nuclear activism. They were typically more cross-class, framed as part of a wider global struggle rather than a narrow class-based conflict.

TGA One additional factor we haven't discussed is age. There are striking examples of generational protest movements such as the one that swept across Europe in 1968, including Britain. Climate change activism has emerged as another.

Authoritarian regimes fear protest because it allows people to find their voice. The pivotal moment is breaking that barrier of fear //

TIMOTHY GARTON ASH

What can today's protesters learn from their predecessors?

KN That raises a central question: how do you organise against repressive regimes? One key factor is achieving a critical mass – breaking out of silos of class or generation and creating a large, united group capable of overcoming fear. This remains a core goal of any successful protest movement.

TGA It is vital to learn from history. For example, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 was violently suppressed, and the Czechoslovak attempt to leave the Warsaw Pact in 1968 was met with Soviet invasion. By 1980–81, activists in Poland were far more cautious, learning from these experiences.

There are several key lessons. First, maintain nonviolence. As the Polish dissident Adam Michnik warned: "Those who start by storming the Bastille may end up building their own Bastilles." Nonviolence achieves more enduring results.

Second, achieve a critical mass. Cascade effects and political theatre are essential, especially in the age of social media. A flash mob may appear impactful but, without sustained engagement, it disappears as quickly as it appeared.

Third, develop a strategy. Clearly identify what you aim to change and how protest can effect that change. Non-violent movements succeed by targeting potential defectors within existing power structures – those who may be persuaded to switch allegiance.

Protest has a promising future, but its lessons are best understood by studying the past. **H**



MICHAEL WOOD ON... THE PLIGHT OF THE LAST UNCONTACTED PEOPLES

// These are the last humans who have stayed outside 'civilisation' //

A NEW REPORT BY SURVIVAL INTERNATIONAL, *Uncontacted Peoples: At the Edge of Survival*, is the latest accounting of the human story – and it is a historical document of unparalleled power. It reveals that at least 196 groups in the world are still uncontacted, most of them gravely threatened by logging, mining and drilling for oil. These are the last human beings who have stayed outside 'civilisation' since the violence of the West reached across the globe after 1492.

The report cast my mind back 25 years to when we made a series of four films telling the story of the Spanish conquest of the Americas. Cortés, Pizarro, Orellana, Cabeza de Vaca: these were men who experienced some of the most incredible adventures in human history. We tracked them on the ground, following in their footsteps over the Andes, up Inca trails to lost cities, and rafting down the Amazon.

The third film was especially powerful in its implications for the here and now, as well as the events of the 16th century. It told the story of the expedition led out of Quito in 1541 by Gonzalo Pizarro (younger half-brother of Francisco, who spearheaded the conquest of the Inca empire). Its goal was to find the fabled El Dorado – 'the Golden Man' – a mythical city of gold believed to exist somewhere in the jungles beyond the Andes. The city was, in fact, unfindable – because it never existed. In trackless terrain, the expedition ran into disaster: soaked by incessant rains, running out of food, the men were reduced to eating their horses and cooking their boot leather. Francisco

Orellana pushed onward in a home-made boat to scout what lay ahead, but such was the speed of the river that he couldn't make his way back to the rest of the men.

After untold sufferings, the survivors of the main army made it back to Quito nearly a year and a half later. Meanwhile, after many adventures, Orellana sailed eastward, navigating the entire length of the Amazon. He was the first European to see the interior of Amazonia at a time when the middle reaches of the river supported huge settlements. Then, from the mouth of the great river, he sailed back north to Trinidad, completing one of the most astounding stories of human endurance.

On our journey, a parallel narrative unfolded. Down the main course of the Amazon, everyone told us that the water levels were fast receding. Climate researchers had just announced that, at the rate of climate change then observed, the Amazon forest would start to transform into savannah in 2042 – coincidentally, the 500th anniversary of the Orellana expedition. If that happened, the climate cycle would be broken, the weight of history literally tipping the balance.

Along the route, we heard stories of indigenous peoples in the depths of the forest. In the river town of Coca in Ecuador, a man told us how, as a youngster, he had lived with the Waorani tribe before he moved to the town and learned Spanish. He told of the struggles of those who chose to stay out of the modern world. One group steadfastly refused all contact; another had killed US missionaries who had not respected their wishes to be left alone. For them, he said, the price of receiving the white man's god was degradation, alcoholism, and the loss of their own language, culture and identity.

The Survival International report features the story of one such people, the Mashco Piro in the Madre de Dios region of Peru – perhaps the single largest remaining uncontacted group. Not long after our journeys for the *Conquistadors* films, haunted by the beauty and tragedy of Peru, I went back with my family. We stayed in the Manu region with local people who lived off the forests and drew sustenance from the river. Beyond them was a checkpoint and a protected region extending 100 miles to the Madre de Dios river where outsiders may not go – and where the Survival report shows the Mashco Piro still live.

So I read the report, with its haunting photos, feeling a sense of profound sadness. The holocaust of indigenous peoples is almost complete. The pattern is the same across the world over the past 500 years: the taking of the land, the extermination of native people and the plundering of the environment, fuelled by white supremacy, evangelical religion, western diseases and sheer greed. And now, five centuries on from the conquest of the Americas, across the entire planet only a few thousand of our ancient brothers and sisters hang on – people who simply do not wish to be contacted. What does that say about us? **H**

.....
Michael Wood is professor of public history at the University of Manchester. He has presented numerous BBC series. His books include *The Story of China* (Simon & Schuster, 2021). You'll find him on X at [MichaelWoodMV](#)

B B C



ILLUSTRATION BY FEMKE DE JONG

OUR DOCTORS SAVE LIVES. SO CAN YOUR WILL.

The lives we save
start with the gifts
you leave



DR RACHAEL CRAVEN
MSF ANAESTHETIST

“When you are working as a doctor in a conflict zone, one of the things you learn is how to manage a mass casualty

incident. This is when a large number of severely wounded people who have been caught up in an explosion, a shooting or a bomb blast all arrive at your hospital within a short period of time. When I was working at MSF’s hospital in the Yemeni city of Aden, we had to treat upwards of 50 people in the aftermath of one explosion.

In a situation like that, you can’t just rush into the single operating theatre with the first wounded people who arrive – you need to triage the injured first to decide who most needs surgery.

If I was working in the UK, ambulance crews would carry out pre-hospital triage and I would be confident that we had the resources

and capacity to conduct multiple surgeries at the same time. But in a conflict zone such as Yemen, you don’t have those resources.

The aftermath of an explosion is generally chaos. There are no ambulances, there is little communication from the scene, and the first people to arrive at hospital are often the least badly injured, as they’ve managed to walk or get a passer-by to help them.

PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

Whether I was in Syria or Libya or Yemen, if one or two people came in with blast injuries, in the back of my mind I always expected that more were on the way and that they would probably be in worse shape.

In Yemen, we worked as a team to triage the wounded and we ensured that those who went into theatre first were the most badly injured.

Sharing that knowledge with the teams you work with is central to the way MSF operates. I was in Yemen to provide teaching in

intensive care for the junior doctors at the hospital, most of whom hadn’t been able to finish their training because of the conflict.

We focus a lot of attention on training and mentoring local staff. It’s a way for us to stand in solidarity with the people we work with and to invest in their – and their country’s – future. It’s work that will continue to save lives long after MSF has left.

I’ve seen people at their best, coming together to provide lifesaving care. Each emergency is different, but we’re always committed to delivering care to those who need it. That is our legacy, but it is not ours alone.

One in six of our lifesaving projects is funded by people leaving gifts in their wills. We can’t do what we do without you.”

THANK YOU

Above: A man carries a wounded child into the MSF-run clinic at Rafah Indonesian Field Hospital in Gaza, 27 December 2023. Photograph MSF

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HIDDEN HISTORIES

KAVITA PURI on the first event commemorating the 1943 Bengal Famine

// Eighty years on, it's time that these 3 million lives are remembered //

IN A MUSEUM IN MANCHESTER, ON AN AUTUMN evening just a few weeks ago, history was made. I joined a group of people who had gathered to pay their respects to casualties of a long-overlooked episode of the Second World War. Curators, students, interested locals and descendants of those involved milled around, drinking chai, looking at pictures in a temporary exhibition.

Organisers believe this was the first event to commemorate the estimated 3 million victims of the 1943 Bengal Famine. Those who died were Indians, but they were also British subjects. It's one of the largest losses of civilian life among the Allies – yet there isn't a memorial, a museum or even a plaque to them anywhere in the world. So that night – organised by the University of Manchester, Manchester Museum and the Imperial War Museum North, and inspired by my BBC podcast *Three Million* – marked a very special moment.

The exhibition featured portraits of some of the survivors I had interviewed in the Bengal countryside. There was Jamuna Purkayeth, who had travelled to Calcutta (now Kolkata) as a little girl with her father in search of charity. When I spoke to her, she told me that she believed that if she had stayed in her village she would have died of hunger.

Also on display were extracts of letters to and from Indian soldiers stationed in the Middle East, censored by colonial authorities for mentioning the extent of the food

crisis. Now those letters – uncensored – were presented in a public space.

There were also Japanese propaganda pamphlets encouraging the Indian population to rise up against the British. In one cartoon, the wartime prime minister, Winston Churchill, is pictured feasting on a sumptuous roast chicken, while underneath the dining table are emaciated, dead Bengalis. The message is clear: Japan will feed you, but the British won't. Also on display were evocative photographs of Sunil Janah, who documented the human cost of the famine in the communist newspaper *People's War*.

Among the speakers that evening was the narrative director from the Imperial War Museum, who talked of the silences in that museum's war archive, and discussed what can be done to remedy the situation. Another was an eyewitness to the famine, Partha Mitter. He told how, as a little boy, he would look through the iron gates of his grand house and see starving mothers clutching their babies, begging for *phan dao*, water in which rice had been cooked. They never asked for the rice – Bengal's staple food – because that would be too much to hope for.

Eighty years since the end of the Second World War, it's about time that these 3 million lives are remembered. They cannot be a mere footnote in history. They are part of Britain's wartime story, and its colonial legacy, that has become contentious – but this night showed that it need

not be so. History is never static. Time allows people to speak, and ask, and collectively to acknowledge and remember. Forgetting need not be permanent.

There will be a time to ask some difficult questions – about how this was allowed to happen, and who was responsible – but this night was dedicated to those who died. There is a dignity in remembering them – a dignity they were not afforded in life.

Who knows whether this will become an annual event, or if a more permanent memorial to the victims will be established. But something is changing – and I learned this night that history can be redemptive. Everyone who gathered felt it, and it was an unexpectedly uplifting experience. **B**

A photo displayed at the temporary exhibition in Manchester shows Kavita Puri with Malati Maity, a survivor of the 1943 Bengal Famine

Kavita Puri

is a journalist and broadcaster for BBC Radio 4. Her latest series, available on BBC Sounds, is *The History Podcast: The Second Map*. She is the author of *Partition Voices: Untold British Stories* (Bloomsbury, 2019)



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LETTERS

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Memories of Malaya

I read Kavita Puri's article on the Second World War in Asia (*Hidden Histories*, December) with great interest.

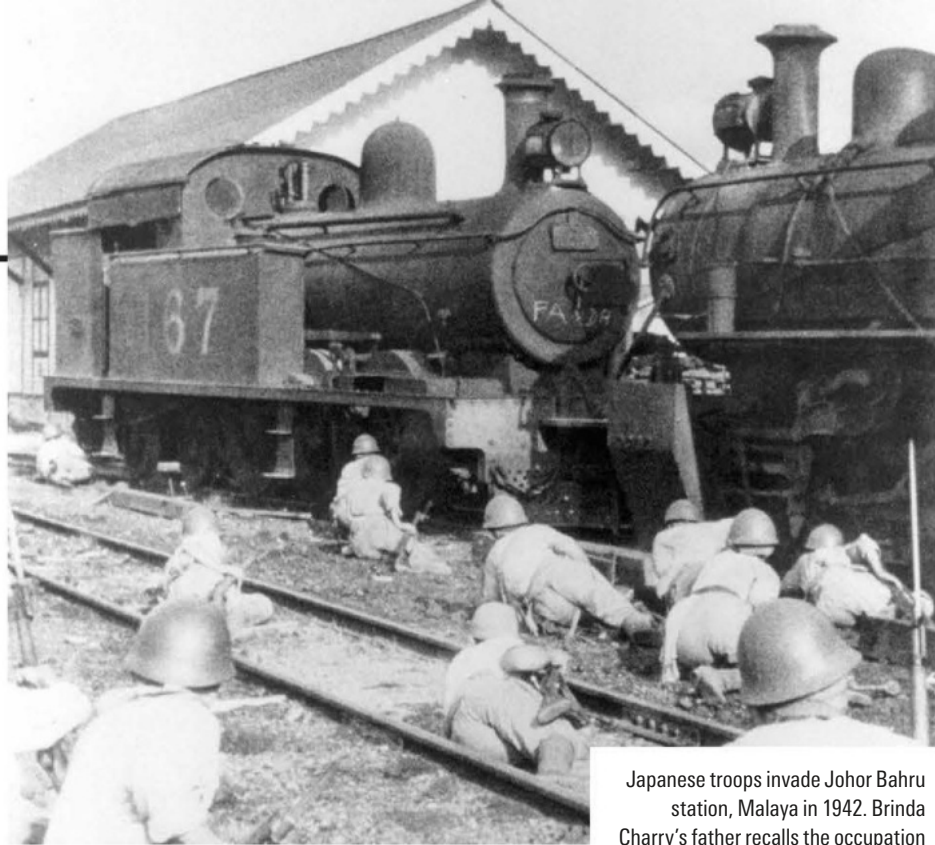
I have often heard my father, V Shankar Charry, talk about his wartime experiences as a small boy in Johor Bahru, Malaya [now Malaysia]. He remembers the Japanese occupation of 1942, after the defeat of Indian and Australian forces fighting for the British. His family home was taken over by the Japanese and, though my grandfather tried to maintain fairly cordial relations with their officers for the safety of his family, my father remembers some looting and a severe shortage of food.

A specific memory that endures is of one young Australian prisoner of war being ordered by a Japanese officer to climb a coconut tree – a feat that requires great expertise. A fall from that great height would result in death, or at least severe injury. My father remembers the young prisoner being overcome with fear – but he cannot say how the episode ended because at that point my grandfather, obviously sensing that this was not a sight for a child to witness, insisted that my father must go back into the house.

In 1945, after the Japanese withdrawal, the house was occupied by British forces. My father remembers the drinking and wild celebrations – sometimes so wild that they annoyed my grandfather – of these triumphant soldiers.

My father is almost 88 years old now, and living in India. He has never gone back to the home or country of his childhood, but the memories of that time and place remain vivid.

Brinda Charry, New Hampshire, USA



Japanese troops invade Johor Bahru station, Malaya in 1942. Brinda Charry's father recalls the occupation

Accurate picture

Following letters in the August and September issues about the iconic photograph of a soldier during the D-Day landing on Sword beach, I would like to set the record straight. That image (shown above right) is in fact a still from footage shot by Sergeant George Laws of the Army Film and Photographic Unit (AFPU). The film can be viewed on our website: <https://film.iwmcollections.org.uk/record/1517> (catalogue reference A70 31-3; Private Macauley is pictured from the 45-second mark).

The Imperial War Museum holds all film and photos taken by the AFPU, plus the cameramen's 'dope sheets' or caption sheets. The work of the AFPU has been used extensively in film, television and publishing. However, the cameramen are rarely credited.

Sergeant Laws did survive the war, but his colleague Norman Clague – who also filmed on D-Day – did not. The Imperial War Museum has links with the AFPU Association, which works to ensure that the work of these men is not forgotten. A notable member is Paul Clark who, at 99, is one of the two last-known surviving members of the AFPU.

Fiona Kelly, senior curator, film, Imperial War Museum London

Tech takes time

Michael Moreton's letter ('Network error', October) about Hedy Lamarr's technological legacy piqued my interest – especially when read alongside Victoria Bateman's interview with Danny Bird on women's overlooked roles in economic history. While Mr Moreton may not have intended to diminish Lamarr's contributions, the juxtaposition

invites a broader reflection. Frequency hopping, co-patented by Lamarr, underpins modern wireless communication. Its adoption in manufacturing is a quiet triumph.

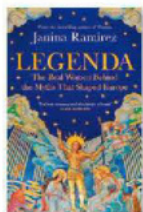
Technological evolution is rarely linear. Alan Turing's wartime work with Tommy Flowers [developing codebreaking machines] built on Charles Babbage and Ada Lovelace's foundations. Punched tape, once used to encode data, later drove early computer numerical control (CNC) machine tools.

In 1973, Sir David McMurtry, then at Rolls-Royce, devised the touch-trigger probe to measure Concorde parts. With John Deer,



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► Page 32



We're rewarding this issue's Letter of the Month writer with a copy of Janina Ramirez's *Legenda*, one of the titles included in our Books of the Year feature. You can read the full list from page 64



Fiona Kelly sheds light on the backstory to this iconic image of the D-Day landings

he later founded Renishaw Ltd (now Renishaw plc). Its probes revolutionised coordinate measuring and, by the 1980s, were becoming integrated into CNC metal-cutting machines. Today, such systems underpin global manufacturing.

How is this linked to Lamarr?

In 2003, Renishaw introduced its first radio probe, using Frequency Hopping Spread Spectrum in the ISM band (2.403–2.481GHz). Designed for high-interference environments where hundreds of machines may operate numerous probes, it enables uncompromised precision manufacturing. Hedy Lamarr's legacy pulses quietly through the machines that shape our world.

Phil Goulding, Gloucestershire

Last blast

I read your article *A Theatre of Hate* (November) with interest. Your timeline finishes with German admiral Dönitz's order for U-boats to cease hostilities – but that wasn't the end of the battle. At 11.03pm on 7 May 1945, U-2336 (commanded by Emil Klusmeier) torpedoed and sank the SS *Avondale Park* at the northern entrance to the Firth of Forth, just 31 miles from the centre of Edinburgh. *Avondale Park* was the last ship lost in the battle of the Atlantic.

It is not known whether Klusmeier didn't receive the surrender order or just ignored it.

Adrian van Toren, Harrogate

Saved by a sneeze

Nick Rennison's 'Did You Know...?' column (Q&A, October) cites a sneeze in Homer's *Odyssey* as evidence that ancient Greeks often took sneezing to be a good omen. Another instance came in 401 BC, during the march of the 'Ten Thousand' Greek mercenaries making their painful way north from what's now southern Iraq following defeat by the Persian ruler Artaxerxes II.

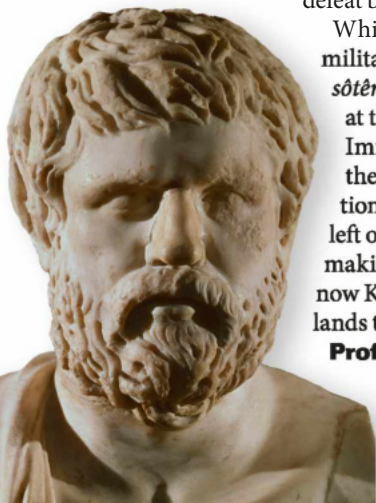
While addressing the men, the Greek military leader Xenophon spoke the word *sôtêria* ('deliverance' or 'salvation') – and, at that moment, a soldier sneezed.

Immediately, the assembly prostrated themselves in awe of the Zeus of Salvation. The 'Ten Thousand' – or what was left of them – were indeed duly saved, making their way back through what is now Kurdistan to the Black Sea and Greek lands the following year.

Professor Paul Cartledge,
Cambridge

Actor Hedy Lamarr, pictured in the 1940s. Her frequency-hopping innovations underpin elements of modern precision manufacturing, says Phil Goulding

A fourth-century BC bust of Xenophon. When a soldier sneezed during a speech by this Greek leader, it was understood to augur salvation, says Paul Cartledge



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Evoking the era Jane Austen depicted, right, in an 1873 engraving. Despite her genius, the novelist couldn't evoke the experience of the working poor — depicted above in William Hogarth's *Beer Street*

Jane Austen was a brilliant observer of Georgian Britain But she couldn't speak for everyone

The author's books depict an evocative slice of early 19th-century life, but many aspects of the Regency era are only hinted at in her novels, as **Lizzie Rogers** reveals



Ever felt like you could be Elizabeth Bennet? You're not alone. Entering Jane Austen's world can feel like an immersive experience. Reading her books (or watching television or film adaptations, or the many spin-offs and lookalikes), it's easy to believe that somehow we've really got to know *her* England – and, by extension, the people who lived in it.

That feeling is encapsulated in the 2008 ITV series *Lost in Austen*, which follows the adventures of 21st-century heroine Amanda Price. Stepping through a portal into the world of *Pride and Prejudice*, Price (played by Jemima Rooper) finds herself in the bosom of the Bennet family, messing up episodes in the novel, trying – with varying degrees of success – to fix them and, inevitably, falling in love with Mr Darcy (Elliot Cowan). Her opening voiceover declares that “I’ve read [*Pride and Prejudice*] so many times now the words just say themselves in my head and it’s like a window opening. It’s like I’m actually *there* – it’s become a place I know so intimately... I can see that world, I can touch it.”

This is far from a new sentiment. In March 1826, after reading *Pride and Prejudice* for the third time, the Scottish author Sir Walter Scott wrote in his journal that Austen “had a talent for describing the involvements and feelings and characters of ordinary life which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with... the exquisite touch which renders ordinary common-place things and characters interesting from the truth of the description and the sentiment... What a pity such a gifted creature died so early.”

Her undeniable talent for character study is one of the key reasons why Austen's work resonates so loudly across the world. Creative retellings of her novels show how the themes, characters and plotlines easily transcend their bounds of Regency England and fit well in other countries, other cultures and other times, with new representations amending the ages, social class and genders of characters. In the 250 years since Austen's birth, her work has morphed into a behemoth that we simultaneously modernise and have made emblematic of life in late 18th and early 19th-century England.

Obscuring obsession

Thanks to her gift for evoking that era, its environment and inhabitants, it's easy to envision ourselves inside her world. We feel able to enter it through the plots of her novels and their adaptations for stage and screen, as well as the extension of her unfinished novel *Sanditon*, fleshed out vividly in the ITV series running from 2019. But there is a danger that



A window into Austen's world

A scene from ITV's *Lost in Austen*, where 21st-century heroine Amanda Price steps into *Pride and Prejudice*, which she describes as “a place I know so intimately”





Scottish superfan

A 19th-century engraving of author Sir Walter Scott, who wrote glowingly of Austen's writing after reading *Pride and Prejudice* for the third time

Reflecting the times

William Hogarth's *Gin Lane* provides a stark portrayal of a teeming urban environment in which drunkenness and debauchery were rife



we conflate her writing too fully with the history of the time, obscuring swathes of this period through our obsession. The picture we receive is one that's been enhanced by layers of interpretation, adaptation and the historical distance between us and the source material. The effect of them all together is "to make us read novels that aren't actually there", argued Helena Kelly in her 2016 book *Jane Austen: The Secret Radical*, echoing the views of other Austen scholars. Because Austen's work feels so modern and accessible, we miss wider perspectives that are alluded to through her clever study of the world around her – but also, importantly, many that she simply could not give us and did not have to.

One person cannot capture every aspect of life in their era, nor act as the singular voice of a generation. No matter how brilliant or important the writer in question is, they cannot speak to the experience of everybody. Yes, Jane Austen was a genius, through whose pen the novel was changed forever. She defied her circumstances in life – being a woman with very little money – to become one of the world's best-loved authors, thanks solely to her immense talent. And she does open a window into this period of history from which we can learn so much – but her work, and the questions it raises, invites us to widen our gaze. Our knowledge of both her and the time in which she lived is only enriched by expanding our understanding by exploring the work of other writers and figures that populated her world, opening our eyes to that diverse, fast-changing and momentous era.

Fascinated by the intelligent satire of Austen's novels, we might look at the art of William Hogarth. Though he died in 1764, more than a decade before the author's birth,

Hogarth offers an unforgiving depiction of the terrible conditions endured by Britain's urban poor

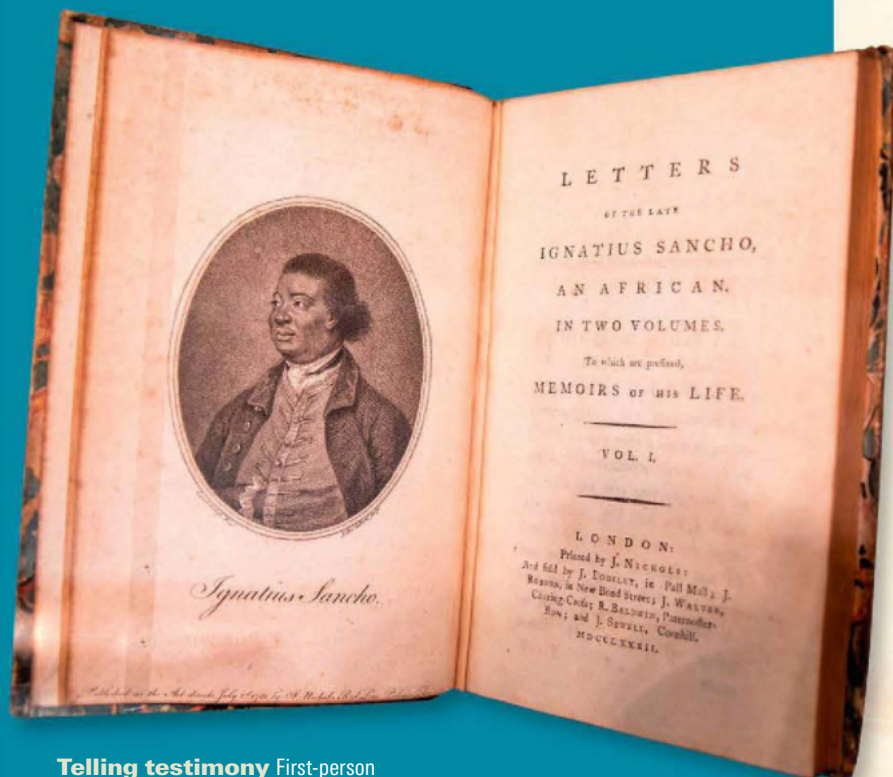
many of his images of 18th-century London highlight the blight of corruption and the terrible conditions endured by Britain's urban poor well into the 19th century. His famous prints *Gin Lane* and *Beer Street* (1751) – the former of which is shown left – could be seen as demonising the drinking habits of the working class. But his work does at least feature ordinary folk as more than just background elements. A portrait of his own servants from the early 1750s, for instance, presents distinct faces and personalities.

Hogarth's father spent time in debtors' prison, a place more often associated with the Victorian work of Charles Dickens, and many other figures from the Georgian period also found themselves inmates. The actress and writer Mary Robinson (c1757–1800), who later became famous for her portrayal of Perdita in *A Winter's Tale* (and for her brief affair with the Prince of Wales), lived with her profligate husband in debtors' prison for several months from 1775; while there, she became the family breadwinner by publishing her poetry.

Robinson's memoirs, prepared from 1798 and published the year after her death, charted a life beset with immense ups and downs. They give us an insight into her youth and first marriage ("I considered chastity as the brightest ornament that could embellish the female mind," she writes) and trace the struggles that continued to beset her into her later years. In fact, much of the preparations for those memoirs was done on envelopes because she couldn't afford to buy fresh paper.

Crime and poverty

To continue our trip into the murkier corners of London during this period, consider the business dealings, crime and poverty prevalent in lower-class areas of the city. One publication that illustrates this side of urban life was *Harris's List of Covent Garden Ladies*, a salacious bestseller published annually from 1757 to 1794 that detailed names and talents of dozens of sex workers. It was interrogated by Hallie Rubenhold in her 2005 book *The*



Telling testimony First-person accounts written by the formerly enslaved – such as the letters of Ignatius Sancho (above) – helped rally Britons to the cause of abolition



Star turn An early 19th-century illustration of sailor-turned-street performer Billy Waters, whose life “highlights the complex intersection of race and disability during this period”

Covent Garden Ladies, which itself inspired the television series *Harlots* (2017–19). These aspects of London are hinted at in *Pride and Prejudice*, in the form of the poverty and depravity that Mrs Bennet fears will be the fate of her daughter Lydia after she runs away to the capital with George Wickham.

Strength in diversity

Sanditon introduces Austen’s only black character: Miss Lambe, an heiress from the West Indies. During the 18th century, it is estimated there were more than 20,000 black Britons – a significant number, in a British population that had exceeded 10 million by 1801. To explore the lives of some of these people, read Gretchen Gerzina’s *Black England: A Forgotten Georgian History* (2022) and Mary L Shannon’s biography *Billy Waters Is Dancing* (2024). The latter gives a voice to a black sailor in Regency Britain whose presence as a street performer was so famed across London that his name became legendary, his life shaped by those who aimed to profit from his talent. Living from around the 1770s until 1823, Waters’ life maps closely onto Austen’s, and highlights the complex

intersection of race and disability during this period.

Mansfield Park, Austen’s third and perhaps most divisive novel, makes clear the links between slavery, the country house and aristocratic wealth. The titular house is built on a fortune sustained by plantations worked by enslaved people in Antigua, and its name may come from Lord Mansfield, whose judicial decisions enabled the advancement towards the abolition of slavery.

Austen’s favourite poet was William Cowper, whose work fervently supported antislavery campaigns. But there were also first-person accounts of the experiences of black people in Britain in that period.

The letters of Ignatius Sancho, born into slavery on an Atlantic ship in 1729 and brought to England at two years old, were published in 1782, after his death. One of them – written to John Wingrave, a London bookseller, in 1778 – contains a stinging rebuke of Britain’s role in the transatlantic slave trade. “I am sorry to observe that the practice of your country (which as a resident I love – and for its freedom, and for the many blessings I enjoy in it, shall ever have my

warmest wishes – prayers – and blessings;) I say, it is with reluctance that I must observe your country’s conduct has been uniformly wicked in the East – West Indies – and even on the coast of Guinea.”

Olaudah Equiano was another high profile supporter of the British abolitionist movement whose writings shone a light on the iniquities of the slave trade. His *Interesting Narrative* autobiography – telling the story of his enslavement in Africa, arrival in Britain as a young man and life after purchasing his freedom in 1766 – was hugely popular when it was published in 1789.

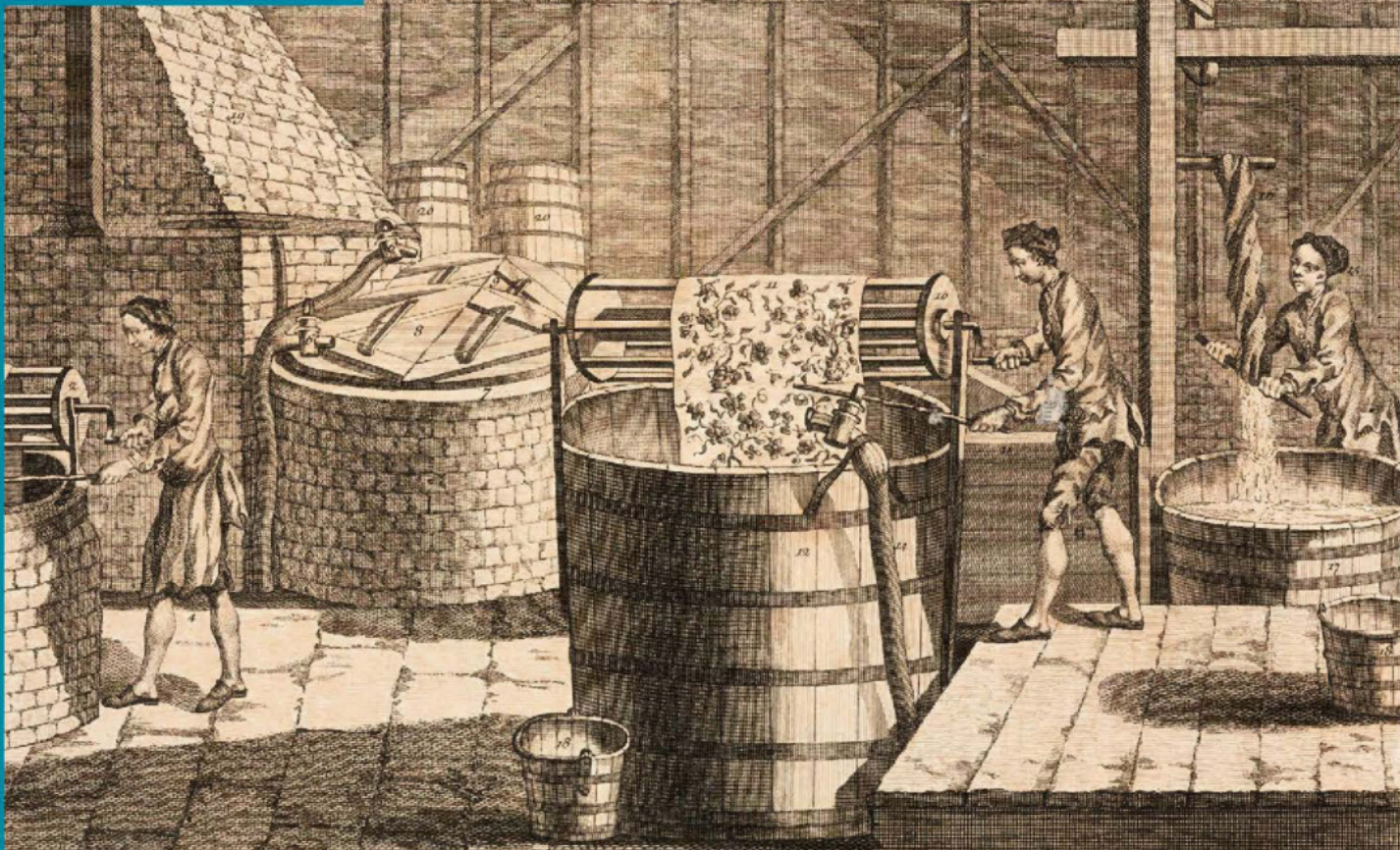
The enslaved female poet Phillis Wheatley revealed in verse her desire for intellectual fulfilment. Travelling to London from Boston with her enslavers, she was able to publish *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in 1773 – believed to be the first set of poems published by an African American. Such writings enable us to understand experiences of black people during the era, reminding us of the often-forgotten diversity of England at this time.

In this vein, the second season of *Bridgerton* (2022) highlighted – albeit through a

Unheard voices An 18th-century illustration of workers dyeing cloth. Jane Austen lived through a boom in industry, but others would document the struggles of the labouring poor



Want more Austen? Check out our new four-part podcast Sunday Series on the great author, from her life and works to her enduring cultural legacy, at historyextra.com/podcast



fictionalised lens – the experiences of south Asian people in Britain. During Jane Austen's lifetime, the British empire was in rapid ascendancy, fuelled by commerce, trade and the ruthless actions of the East India Company. The author's own cousin, Eliza Hancock – who later married Jane's brother Henry – grew up in India as the daughter of a British surgeon to the East India Company.

Long-lost sister

William Makepeace Thackeray's novel *Vanity Fair*, which was set during the Regency period though published in 1848, highlights through the character of Jos Sedley the wealth that could be accumulated by young people capitalising on travelling to India. Historian Durba Ghosh has noted that Thackeray had a long-lost (and possibly mixed-heritage) sister, Amelia – also known as Sarah Redfield – in India, and explored the stories of many south Asian women, demonstrating the strong connections between Britain and India at the time.

Thackeray's dramatic novel is more specifically set during the Napoleonic Wars, hinted at in Austen's work through the regular

This tumult extended to Britain's shores as violence broke out over questions of religion and the vote

presence of a militia or naval characters, though this inclusion is often overlooked as a reflection of the lived experience of constant war and unrest. Two of Austen's brothers were in the navy and one was in a militia regiment, while her cousin Eliza lost her first husband, the Comte de Feuillide, to the guillotine. The absence of peace and a sense of perpetual uncertainty were harrowing facts of life. This tumult extended to Britain's shores as violence broke out over questions of religion and parliamentary representation.

Through the late 18th and early 19th century, villages, towns and cities grew rapidly while at the same time the voices of ordinary people were not heard. Burgeoning industry created a new class of wealthy people, while also fostering extremely testing working conditions for the labouring poor. We tend to think of these subjects as uniquely endemic to the Victorian period, taking centre stage in the writing of Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell, but the boom in industry was firmly rooted in Austen's lifetime. For instance, Lancashire's cotton industry was in full swing by the late 18th century, with some 20,000 apprentices working in cotton mills in 1800.

Textile magnate Robert Peel (1750–1830), long-term MP for Tamworth and father of the future prime minister of the same name, began campaigning and introducing legislation on child labour in the early years of the 19th century. Spending time in London, Bath and Southampton, Jane Austen would have been offered significant insights into the growth of industry and urban overcrowding.

We celebrate Austen's novels for the questions she raises about the position of



Notes on a scandal

Mary Wollstonecraft often strayed beyond social norms, and her writings on women's rights caused a sensation

Rural retreat A detail from a postcard showing the 'Ladies of Llangollen': Sarah Ponsonby and Lady Eleanor Butler. Their relationship attracted a lot of attention in late 18th-century Britain

women in society, a subject that preoccupied many of her contemporaries. Early feminist writer and philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft argued fervently for the recognition of women as rational creatures who deserved rights accordingly in a world that granted them few, if any. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* she wrote: "One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from books written on this subject by men, who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers."

Wollstonecraft's words caused a sensation – and when, after her premature death in 1797, her husband, William Godwin published her biography, so did the story of her life. She lived frequently outside the bounds of accepted social propriety – a point that enables us to delve deeper into the world of reputation, of making spaces to safely subvert societal expectations and legal doctrine, and of understanding how relationships, freedom and restriction truly worked in practice.

Wollstonecraft argued fervently for the recognition of women as rational creatures

The third season of *Sanditon* (2023) presented a slow-burn romance between two gay men, Arthur Parker and Lord Harry Montrose – the storyline breathing a small piece of fictional life into the rich LGBTQ+ history of this period. A visible real-life example can be found in the cottage named Plas Newydd in Llangollen, Wales where from 1780 the couple Sarah Ponsonby and Lady Eleanor Butler created a sanctuary for queer happiness. They became famous within their own lifetimes, visited by Sir Walter Scott

and given a royal pension by George III upon the intercession of Queen Charlotte.

We cannot – and should not expect to – learn everything about the history of the Regency period from the pages of Jane Austen's novels. But as fans, readers and historians, we are indebted to her for providing a gateway into this tumultuous period, into which new research is being undertaken all the time, shining light on previously unheard voices and hidden faces. It is all these lived experiences that weave a rich tapestry, helping us to better know the period in which Jane Austen lived – one that indelibly shaped her and the masterpieces she left behind. **H**

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Lizzie Rogers is a historian, curator and writer who specialises in women and historic houses in the 18th and early 19th centuries, and their depiction in popular culture



For more on the life and times of the novelist, watch **Jane Austen: Rise of a Genius** on BBC iPlayer: bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episodes/m002661h/jane-austen-rise-of-a-genius

TWO

The execution of Mary Pearcey, convicted in 1890 of the murder of Phoebe and Tiggy Hogg, depicted in *The Illustrated Police News*. The public struggled to believe that a woman was capable of such a brutal crime

Murder most female

Women accused of violent murders have often faced assumptions about their motives and disbelief that the 'gentle sex' could commit such bloody crimes.

Rosalind Crone investigates four cases from the 19th century

Accompanies
the fourth series of
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An illustration of "the atrocious Eliza Ross" from an 1832 book about London 'Burkers' – bodysnatchers – including an account of her murder of elderly Caroline Walsh

1 A female bodysnatcher?

At a time when selling human bodies to anatomy schools reaped hefty payouts, some desperate criminals killed to get their hands on fresh corpses. Was **Elizabeth Ross** one such grasping murderer?

In the early 19th century, 'resurrection men' dug up recently buried corpses to meet the huge demand for cadavers to use in teaching and surgical practice. Others were too impatient to wait for someone to die before snatching a body – and took matters into their own hands.

Between 1828 and 1831, William Burke (operating with accomplice William Hare) in Edinburgh, and John Bishop and Thomas Williams in London, were convicted and hanged for murdering numerous people in order to sell their bodies to anatomy schools. Indeed, all of the infamous bodysnatchers of 19th-century Britain were male. It's certainly conceivable that women were involved in the trade as helpmates – but could they ever have been the instigators, or even killers?

Meet Elizabeth Ross (alias Cook), a 38-year-old Irish immigrant in London with a reputation for drunkenness, violence and petty crime. She had once been accused of skinning alive six of her neighbours' cats, and it was rumoured that she had murdered a 14-year-old girl who went missing while in her care. Elizabeth's common-law husband,

Edward Cook, who worked as a nightwatchman for the parish of Aldgate, associated with resurrection men. Little wonder, then, that fellow parishioner Ann Buton was very concerned when her grandmother, Caroline Walsh – at that time an 84-year-old pedlar – accepted Elizabeth's offer of cheap lodgings.

On 19 August 1831, Caroline moved into the small attic room occupied by the Cook family – Elizabeth, Edward and their 12-year-old son Ned – at 7 Goodman's Yard. With only one bed and a small table, Caroline was

expected to sleep on the floor in the corner of the room. The next morning, when Ann came to check on her grandmother, Caroline was nowhere to be seen.

Missing, presumed dead

After searching the streets, poorhouses, hospitals and prisons for her grandmother, Ann Buton became worried, and told the police about her suspicions. But it wasn't until October that an officer launched an investigation and arrested all three members of the Cook family. Elizabeth appeared unfazed. "With all your trouble," she remarked, "you have not found the old woman's body."

Elizabeth's son, Ned, soon explained why. He told the court that on 19 August, soon after Caroline Walsh had gone to bed, his mother had suffocated the old lady. His father had been leaning out of the window at the time. Elizabeth then "lifted [the body] off the bed herself" and carried it downstairs. The next morning, Ned saw a sack in the cellar, with "partly black and partly grey" hair poking out of the top. That evening, between 11pm and midnight, Ned watched his mother carrying the sack down Goodman's Yard. "She told me," he continued, "that she took the body to the London Hospital."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the surgeons at the hospital denied ever having received a body from Elizabeth Ross, but the rag sellers in the market testified that she had sold them distinctive items of clothing that belonged to Caroline Walsh. Elizabeth was convicted of murder (Edward was acquitted) and was hanged on 9 January 1832.

But how reliable was the evidence of a 12-year-old boy? Could Elizabeth have carried a body by herself all the way from Goodman's Yard in Aldgate to the London Hospital in Whitechapel? In the moral panic about bodysnatching that had erupted in the early 1830s, was Elizabeth – already a woman with a bad reputation – accused and convicted of a crime she did not commit? Or does her case suggest that we need to look more closely at female involvement in body snatching?

Ross's son told the court that, soon after Caroline Walsh went to bed, his mother suffocated the old lady

2 Matricide – or a terrible mishap?

Kitty Newton, who grew up in a troubled family, was accused of murdering her mother – but it may have been a tragic accident

At 2am on 5 December 1848, in a grand house on the banks of the river Severn in Bridgnorth, Shropshire, servant Mary Corfield woke to the smell of smoke and the sound of her disabled master, Mr Dyer, crying out. Mary rushed downstairs and out of the house to call for help. Neighbours quickly came to the aid of Mr Dyer, while Mary found evidence of a fire in the kitchen – a half-burned sofa and pillows, wet sheets, and oil on the floor. The previous evening, Ann Newton – mother of the housekeeper, Kitty Newton – had decided to stay the night and sleep in the kitchen. Her burned body was found lying face down in an outbuilding on the property.

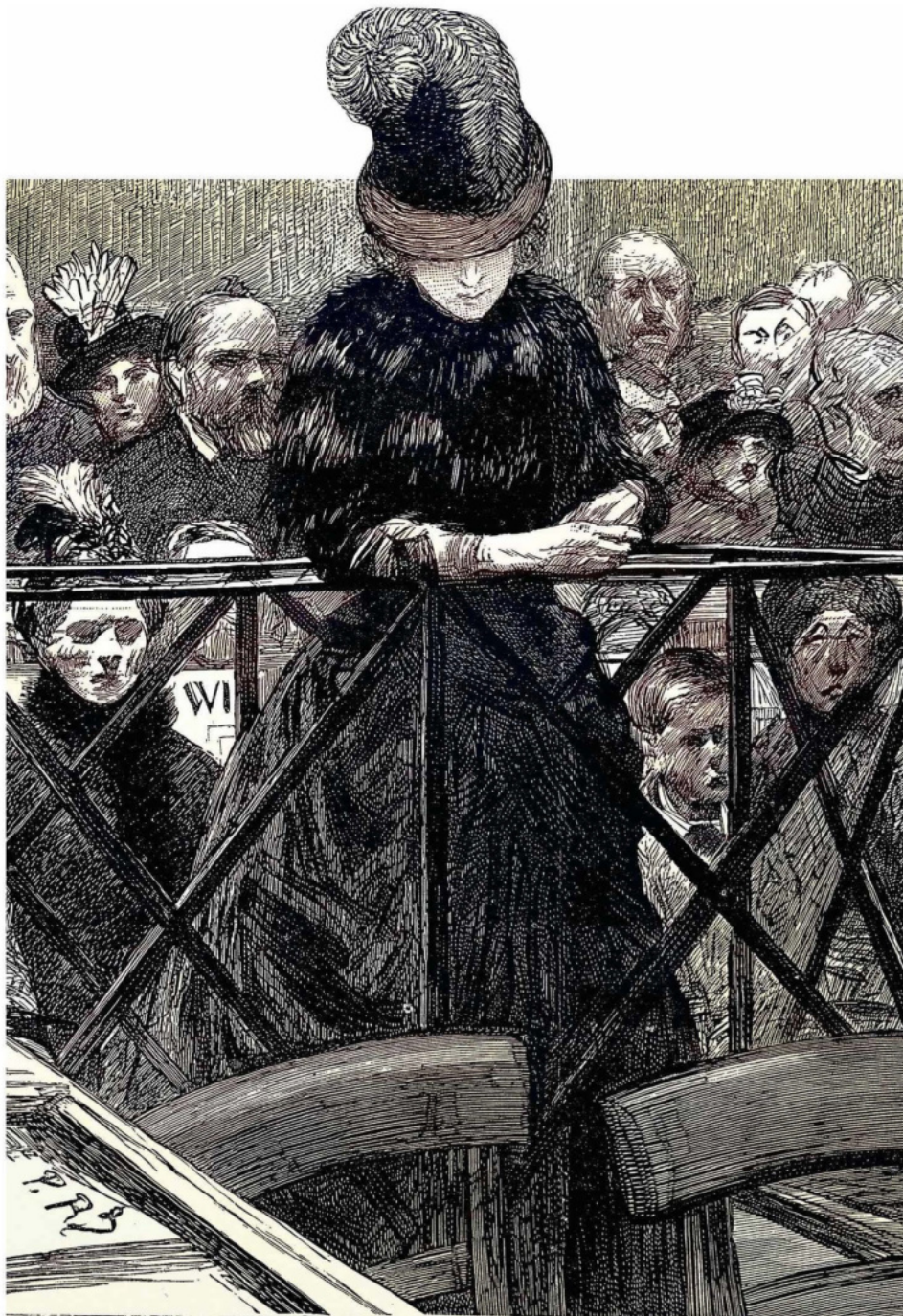
The police were called, and Kitty was arrested, accused of murdering her mother. An inquest was quickly convened and witnesses called. Mary Corfield claimed that Kitty and Ann had had a turbulent relationship. When Ann visited Kitty, mother and daughter would drink and quarrel, sometimes violently. On one occasion, Mary said, Kitty had beaten Ann with a hand-whip so severely that pieces of flesh were torn from Ann's arms and a doctor had to be called.

Kitty's uncle, Ann's brother, suggested that his niece might have killed his sister to get her hands on an inheritance. He reported that on one occasion, when he spoke to Kitty about ill-treating her mother, she replied: "I should like to see the d*** old bitch dead and cut in quarters! She has lived too long, and has kept me out of my money till the hairs of my head are got grey!"

Shamed and condemned

Was Kitty's uncle telling the truth? As the newspapers revealed, hers was a troubled family. Another uncle had been convicted and hanged for beating his pregnant wife to death. Kitty's parents had had an unhappy and violent marriage. And as a teenager, Kitty had been sent to work as a housekeeper for a third uncle, and became pregnant with his child. While the child was accepted by the family, Kitty was shamed and condemned – by her own mother, too.

However, other witnesses at the inquest testified that Kitty showed great care



A Victorian illustration of a woman in a courtroom dock. When Kitty Newton was accused of murdering her mother, a botched post-mortem helped secure a not guilty verdict

towards her mother. The local curate suggested that Ann "was in a troubled and unhappy condition, and wished to die".

Two medical men criticised the post-mortem examination, which failed to examine Ann's larynx or trachea, making it impossible to determine the true cause of death. The inquest jury failed to reach a consensus and, after enduring three criminal trials and spending 15 months in prison, Kitty was found not guilty and set free. She moved into a small cottage in Bridgnorth, left to her by Mr Dyer who had died while she was awaiting trial, and lived off the inheritance from her mother.

Was Kitty a greedy, murderous daughter? Or had Ann accidentally (or deliberately) set fire to herself on that fateful night? After all, Victorian kitchens, which combined naked flames with flammable liquids, could be dangerous places. We may never know.

When Ann visited Kitty, mother and daughter would drink and quarrel, sometimes violently

3 Pathological lies or a cry for help?

Accused of murder, **Jessie McLachlan** issued a string of contradictory statements – but proof of her guilt remained elusive

On 7 July 1862, John Fleming and his son arrived home at 17 Sandyford Place, Glasgow, after spending the weekend at the family's summer house on the Firth of Clyde. The two men were greeted at the door by John's father, James, an old man in his eighties who had decided to forgo the family holiday. But opening the door was the job of the servant, Jessie McPherson. Where was she?

James said that he had not seen Jessie since Friday night, and that her door was locked. The three men went to investigate. John found a key and opened the door to Jessie's bedroom, where they found her dead body. Her head had been smashed in, she was naked from the waist down, and there were defensive wounds on her hands. Clothes and sheets were soaked in blood, and someone had attempted to wash the kitchen floor. A post-mortem concluded that Jessie's injuries pointed "to a female or a weak man as having inflicted them". Further investigation revealed that Jessie's best clothes and some of the Flemings' silverware were missing.

Evidence on a plate

The police arrested James Fleming on suspicion of murder, but their attention was soon drawn in a different direction. A pawnbroker claimed that a woman had sold him some plate that matched the description of the silverware taken from the Flemings' house. That woman was 28-year-old Jessie McLachlan, a former servant of the Flemings and a friend of Jessie McPherson, who had married a seaman and had a child.

McLachlan was arrested and brought in for questioning. Over the course of a week or so, she gave three statements in response to the discovery of new evidence linking her to the crime. Each contained lies and contradictions. James Fleming was released, and McLachlan was indicted for murder.

At her trial between 17 and 20 September, McLachlan's legal counsel argued that the prosecution could not prove that McLachlan had been at Sandyford Place on the fateful weekend. But, despite further compelling evidence – including some from

friends of McPherson who claimed that James Fleming was sexually harassing his servant – it was a losing battle. The judge encouraged the jury to return a guilty verdict – which they did, after deliberating for just 15 minutes.

McLachlan responded by delivering yet another statement, which she had written while awaiting trial – though her lawyers had refused to use it in her defence. McLachlan

admitted that she had been at Sandyford Place on the night when McPherson was killed – but she claimed that James had murdered McPherson after the latter rejected his sexual advances. James then secured McLachlan's silence with a thinly veiled threat: "Don't be feart, only if you tell you know about her death, you will be taken in for it as well as I... My life is in your power, and yours is in my power."

McLachlan's statement was enough to cast doubt over her conviction, trigger an inquiry and save her from the gallows. Her sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, and she served 15 years behind bars. James Fleming, meanwhile, lived out his days as a free man.

There is a further twist in this tale. McLachlan gave a fifth statement to her lawyer, in which she confessed to the murder. It was quickly retracted, but the question remains: was this an admission of guilt? Or a cry from a woman desperate to be heard, knowing that she would likely never see her young child again, and that her voice would be suppressed throughout a long prison sentence for a crime she did not commit?

John found a key and opened the door to Jessie McPherson's bedroom, where they found her dead body



An illustration of Jessie McLachlan, who was convicted of the murder of her friend Jessie McPherson – though doubts remained



The murder of Phoebe Hogg and her baby Tiggie by Mary Pearcey, as imagined in *The Illustrated Police News*. Tiggie's pram (right) remains on display in Madame Tussauds wax museum, London

4 Could a woman commit brutal murder?

After a mother and baby were slaughtered, ample evidence pointed to a love rival, **Mary Pearcey**, as the culprit – but many couldn't believe that a woman might be capable of such a vicious crime

On the evening of 24 October 1890, the body of a brutally murdered woman was discovered behind a row of newly built houses in Belsize Park, London. Her head was "almost entirely severed from the body" and her skull, pierced in several places, had suffered "terrible blows from some penetrating instrument". Newspapers declared that the victim must be a prostitute, the killer must be a man, and the murder could be the work of Jack the Ripper, who had not long ago terrorised the streets of the capital.

They were wrong on all three counts. The body was identified next morning as Phoebe Hogg, a 31-year-old mother. She had last been seen on the afternoon of the discovery leaving the home she shared with her husband, Frank, with her 18-month-old baby, Tiggie. Her pram, covered with blood, had been found a mile and a half from Phoebe's body. On 26 October, Tiggie's body was found in some nettles near Finchley Road.

A search of the Hogg's home revealed in Frank's coat pocket a key to the lodgings of

a family friend, 24-year-old Mary Pearcey. The police decided to visit the property. Opening the door, they discovered a horrific scene: blood was splattered on the walls, ceiling and floor, and two kitchen windowpanes had been smashed. They found lace curtains, clothing, a poker and a big knife all covered in blood, and a button from Phoebe's jacket. Mary claimed that she had been killing mice. The police arrested her for murder.

Suspicious minds

The public could not believe that a woman had committed such a brutal crime, or even possessed the physical strength to dispose of the bodies. Suspicion continued to swirl around Frank, especially when it was discovered that he and Mary were lovers. Did he want to get rid of his wife to be with Mary? Yet Frank had an alibi for the time of the murder, and there was no evidence that he had encouraged or helped Mary to kill his wife. A neighbour claimed that she had seen Mary, alone, pushing a heavily loaded pram along the street an hour before Phoebe's body was found. Mary admitted that

she had invited Phoebe and Tiggie to tea that afternoon, but denied that she had killed them. "I would not do such a dreadful thing," she declared, adding: "I would not hurt anyone."

On 3 December 1890, Mary was convicted of murder and sentenced to death. A plea for clemency on the grounds of insanity failed, and she was hanged at Newgate Prison on 23 December. She begged Frank to visit her before her execution. He had already left London – but not before he had sold Tiggie's pram to Madame Tussauds wax museum in Marylebone Road. There it remains on display in the infamous Chamber of Horrors – a reminder that perhaps women have the potential to be killers just as brutal as men. **H**

Rosalind Crone is professor of history at the Open University. Her books include *Violent Victorians* (Manchester University Press, 2012)



Rosalind is historical consultant on series 4 of **Lady Killers with Lucy Worsley**, which begins 16 December on BBC Radio 4 and BBC Sounds **BBC RADIO 4**

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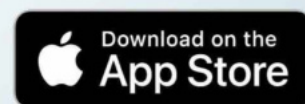
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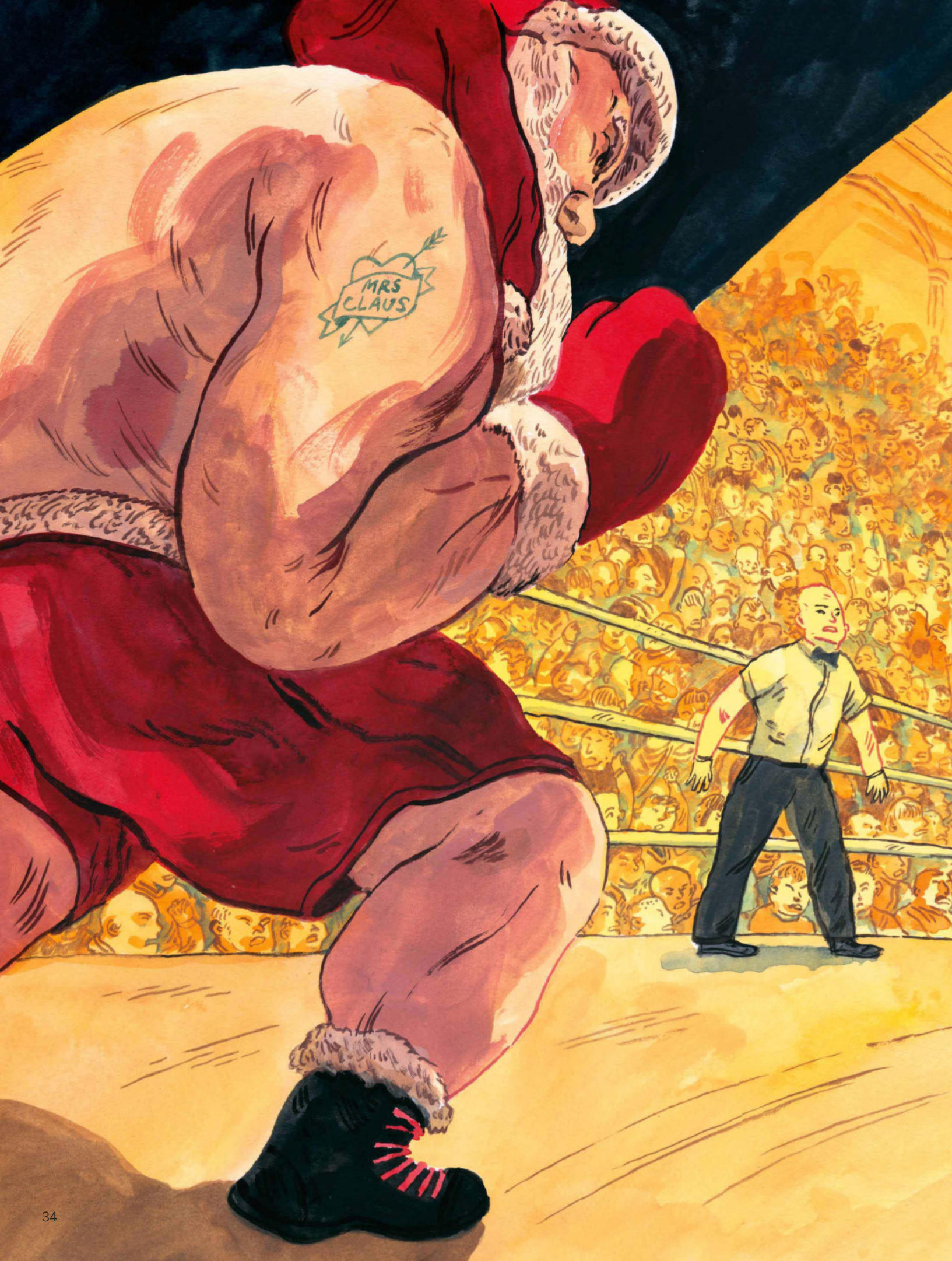
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BBC **HiSTORY** MAGAZINE



The true identity of the white-bearded, red-robed figure who fills children's stockings at Christmas has long been debated. **Thomas Ruys Smith** sizes up the merry contenders

ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES ALBON



Santa Claus v Father Christmas

Tis the night before Christmas, when all through the house, not a creature is stirring... but someone is. While the household sleeps, a jolly visitor carefully places presents in stockings

hung by the fireplace. After taking a sip of whatever tippie has been thoughtfully left out for him, he pockets a carrot and disappears up the chimney. With a tinkle of sleigh bells he disappears into the night with his faithful reindeer, a merry laugh echoing across the rooftops. It's a familiar ritual – with one fundamental point of contention.

Who do you think it was that brought you these presents? Are you a Father Christmas fundamentalist or are you a Santa Claus supporter? Each figure has his passionate partisans, and each is wrapped up with issues of national and regional identity. A recent YouGov poll of around 4,000 British residents suggested that the UK is split right down the middle on the topic – though Santa enjoyed a narrow lead by a couple of percentage points.

What you may find surprising is that this isn't a modern conundrum. In fact, the ongoing battle for seasonal supremacy has created a schism in British culture since the Victorian era. Despite what some Father Christmas traditionalists might think, Santa Claus is not some recent American arriviste. The forgotten history of the friendly rivalry between this pair of festive icons goes much further back, taking us on a transatlantic journey through popular culture to a time even before our modern celebration of Christmas was taking shape.

Nick of time

Let's start at the beginning – or as close as we can get to it. The figure of Father Christmas is undoubtedly more venerable than Santa Claus – in English culture, at least. References to characters who served to personify the period of yuletide feasting and merrymaking can be traced back to at least the 15th century. But Father Christmas really emerged as a champion of the season when Christmas came under threat in Britain.

He joined the fray in the midst of religious and cultural arguments during the Civil War, when Puritans tried to suppress traditional Christmas celebrations. One anti-Puritan pamphlet written in 1652 lamented that Father Christmas, who could once “knock down Hercules”, was lately suffering from “a deep consumption”, his might sadly diminished.

Christmas celebrations and Father Christmas both returned with the Restoration. But it wasn't until the Victorian revival of historic traditions, and its creation of new

Despite what some traditionalists might think, Santa Claus is not some recent American arriviste

ones, that Father Christmas was truly reinvigorated as the presiding spirit of the season. Certainly, Charles Dickens' portrait of the jovial Ghost of Christmas Present in *A Christmas Carol* (1843) owes a lot to the established idea of Father Christmas as the personification of yuletide celebrations – crowned with winter greenery, and accompanied by bountiful piles of food and a brimming wassail bowl. This iteration had no truck with reindeer, though, and he certainly never stuffed a stocking – at least, not until his American rival started to descend British chimneys.

Enter Santa Claus. Tracing his origins takes us across the Atlantic to 18th-century New England. Puritan colonists, in common with their English counterparts, had been positively averse to Christmas celebrations, but plenty of European immigrants imported their Christmas celebrations to America, where they took root and found new forms. A wealth of winter gift-bringers set up shop in their respective immigrant communities, from the Dutch Saint Nicholas (and his secularised counterpart Sinterklaas) to wilder figures such as Knecht-Ruprecht

and Belsnickel from Germany. Undoubtedly, Father Christmas made the trip across the Atlantic, too; despite the Puritans' best efforts, he found a warmer reception in the Southern colonies.

The figure of Santa Claus emerged from this characteristically diverse American melting pot. Tantalising references to a distinctive new seasonal gift-bringer started to emerge in the late 18th century. As his name suggests, Santa Claus took inspiration from Saint Nicholas, a fourth-century bishop of Myra (in what's now Turkey), about whom tales were told of secret gift-giving. But elements of other European traditions are evident, too. In appearance, Santa was more rough and ready than might be imagined. And, rather than appearing on 5 or 6 December (the feast day of Saint Nicholas), when he came to homes in many parts of central Europe, Santa Claus visited American families on Christmas Eve.

The age of Santa

Though the exact origins of Santa Claus remain murky, 1821 certainly marked a key moment in his emergence onto the seasonal stage. That Christmas, an ephemeral publication for young readers called *The Children's Friend* was published in New York. From its richly illustrated pages leapt the now-recognisable figure of ‘Old Santeclaus’.

This character visited children on Christmas Eve, left presents in their hanging stockings, and travelled in a sleigh pulled by reindeer. Whether this reflected folk traditions that were already in evidence or newly invented them for its young readers – it was probably a bit of both – the age of Santa had arrived.

Almost immediately, his public profile was boosted by the 1823 publication – initially anonymous – of a poem that is still very familiar to us today: Clement Clarke Moore's *A Visit from St Nicholas*. Though that title called him by his older name, the newspaper in which it appeared introduced the verses as a “description of that unwearied patron of children... Sante Claus”. Moore's timing was perfect: soon the poem became an emblem of a new kind of domestic Christmas centred on the family, the home and the excitement of children waiting for their stockings to be filled by a magical visitor. In the US, it did much to spread the legend of Santa Claus to eager young ears. “Just think of it!” exclaimed an American commentator in 1875. “Until we had heard or read this, we didn't know much about him.”

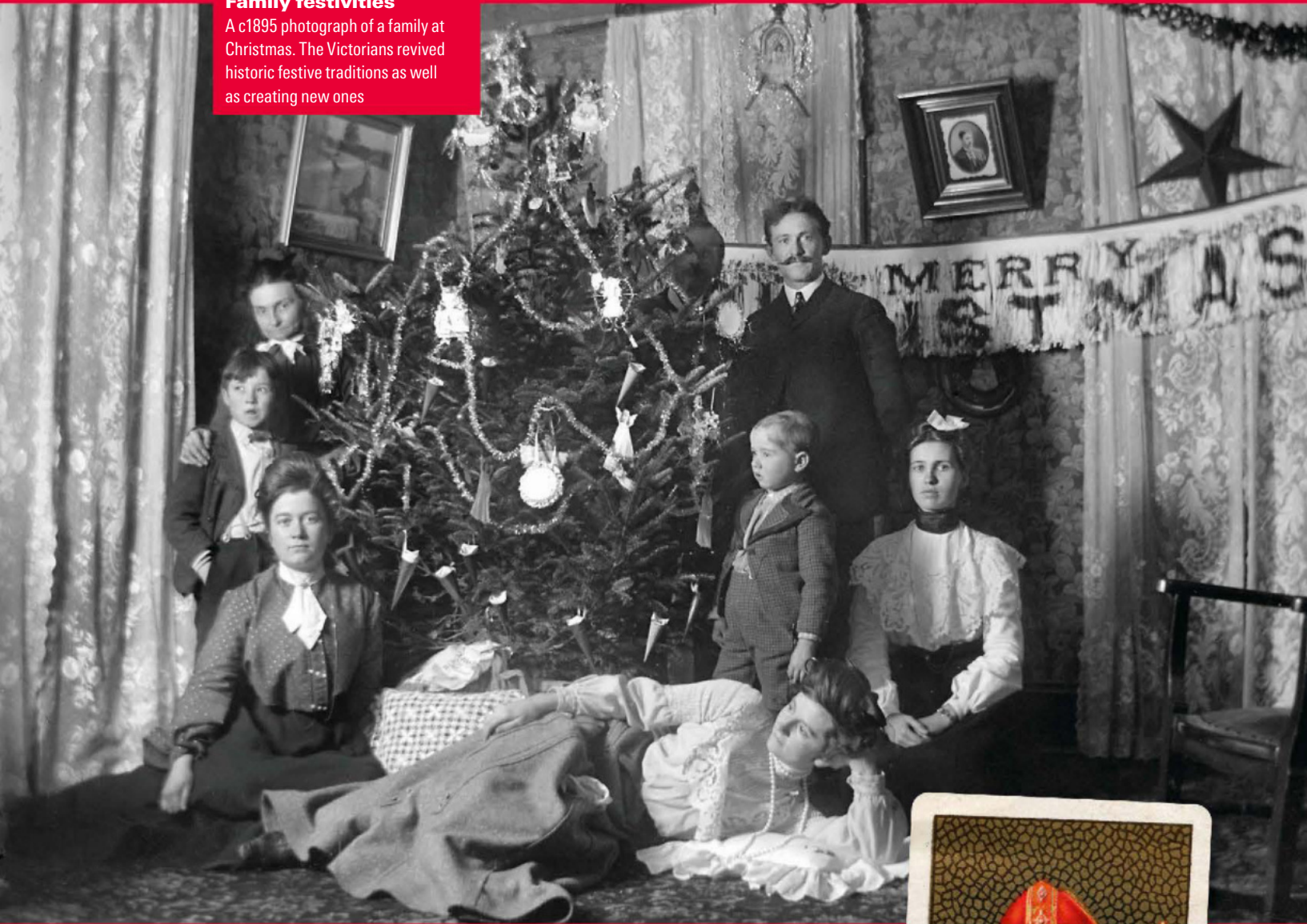
Over the decades that followed, American writers and artists continued to develop Santa's backstory, locating his base in the north pole, revealing his workshop of elves, and even giving him a wife. By the middle of



“Old Santeclaus” depicted in an illustration from *The Children's Friend* (1821), which marked his emergence onto the seasonal stage in the US

Family festivities

A c1895 photograph of a family at Christmas. The Victorians revived historic festive traditions as well as creating new ones



European imports

The Feast of St Nicholas, painted by Dutch artist Jan Steen c1665–68. Immigrants transported their own Saint Nicholas to North America



Good nick

A c1890 lithograph of Nicholas of Bari, also known as Saint Nicholas of Myra. The US version of Santa Claus can trace his roots to this fourth-century bishop



Hues of patriotism

A c1910 postcard printed in Germany showing Santa Claus in green. There was a preference in England for a home-grown gift-bringer, Father Christmas

Festive footwarmers

A c1870 illustration for Clement Clarke Moore's 1823 poem *A Visit from St. Nicholas*, which disseminated the idea of hanging up stockings in the US. The poem had made its way to Britain by the 1850s



the 19th century, Santa Claus's reach had expanded from his regional base in and around New York to become a ubiquitous figure in American Christmases. "Nobody ever saw him," as one American described in 1853, "though everybody has heard of him." Emboldened by such success, Santa looked to expand his empire further still.

American influence

Then as now, the potent slices of American popular culture that crossed the Atlantic had a profound effect on the seasonal behaviour of the young – not to mention their demands on parents – in Britain. Slowly but surely, Santa Claus gained a foothold in the Old World, his legend disseminated in popular literature.

Reprints of Moore's poem were certainly circulating in Britain by the 1850s, and probably earlier. Published in the *Illustrated London News* in 1855, it was accompanied by some useful advice for British children looking to emulate their American counterparts: "Before going to bed, the children hang their newest stockings near the chimney, or pin them to the curtains of the bed. Midnight finds a world of hosiery waiting for favours; and the only wonder is that a single Santa Klaus can get around among them all."

American popular culture had a profound effect on the seasonal behaviour of young people in Britain

One American book, now largely forgotten, seems to have had a particular impact on the profile of Santa Claus in Britain. Sisters Susan and Anna Warner shot to fame in 1850 when the former published *The Wide, Wide World*, one of the bestselling books of the 19th century. Hundreds of thousands of British readers read of its heroine, Ellen Montgomery, hanging up her stocking for Santa at Christmas-time – and perhaps emulated her hopeful act.

Even more significant was the sisters' 1853 story *Carl Kringen; or, a Christmas Stocking*. The tale of a poor young American boy visited by Santa Claus one Christmas Eve, it seems to have captivated a generation of

young Victorians. Looking back to her mid-century childhood, British writer Sarah Tooley recalled that the Warners' book did more than anything "to popularise the visits of Santa Claus in our own country"; when British children read the story of Carl's adventures, it "caught their imagination, and 'St Nick' is now almost as popular in London as in New York". New British editions of the book were still being produced in the closing years of the 19th century.

As early as 1856, reviewing the transformations of Christmas celebrations over the previous decade or so, one Birmingham newspaper marvelled that Christmas stockings were already an established part of the season, "for Santa-Claus has had the temerity to scale the wooden walls of old England, of late years".

Having scaled those walls, Santa became a familiar presence in British Christmases for the remaining years of the 19th century. As the London *Evening Standard* judged in 1861, "the children of England may be pleased with the advent of Santa Claus". Even as late as 1896, a writer for the *Manchester Courier* declared: "I do think that Santa Claus is the most beautiful myth which ever comes into our lives." So, when Victorian children hung



Sleighting it Stateside An American Christmas card printed at the turn of the 20th century depicts Santa Claus as we still know him today – sporting a red outfit with fluffy white trimming, driving a sleigh loaded with presents and drawn by flying reindeer

up their stockings, it was Santa Claus that they expected to fill them.

Not that Father Christmas retreated entirely in the face of Santa's celebrity. He increasingly appeared on cards and in magazine illustrations as an embodiment of the festive season. In the late 19th century, at least, there was clearly room for both figures in the landscape of British Christmas celebrations.

In 1876, for example, the *Darlington & Richmond Herald* found space in its account of the coming "Christmastide" for a tribute to both "Old Father Christmas" as the incarnation of the "merry season" and the American newcomer who had become a central part of domestic celebrations: "We envy not the home where the Christmas stocking... is not an established institution and Santa Claus one of the patron saints of the children's calendar."

Blurred figures

It wasn't long, though, before the outlines of these defined figures, with their distinctive roles, began to blur and merge. Even in the 1880s, Father Christmas was sometimes named as the figure who filled festive stockings. The shadow of war and a growing jingoism seems to have sped up that process,

and national tensions found their way into Christmas debates.

In 1912, one rather confused memoirist, looking back to his childhood in the mid-19th century, declared: "I am glad to say that in those days people knew nothing (at any rate, they knew nothing in our part of England) about such German things as 'Christmas Trees', or such German saints as 'Santa Claus'. Our Christmas presents were found in stockings, and put there by Father Christmas."

He was taken to task for this assertion by a correspondent to *Notes & Queries* magazine, who attempted to set the record straight. "I am as John Bullish as may be but I do not remember finding any gifts in my youthful socks or stockings," they wrote, "and have an impression that my first introduction to the contemplation of such cornucopias was in the pages of an American story-book."

Such memories soon faded, though, and by 1933 one newspaper laid out a deceptively simple answer to the question of who exactly stuffed British stockings: "Here we call him Father Christmas, in America he is Santa Claus." The patriotic preference for a home-grown gift-bringer was, at least temporarily, in the ascendancy.

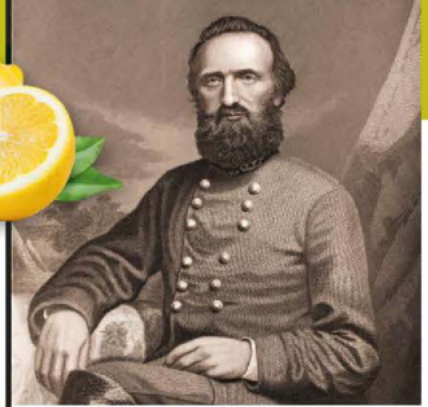
Since then, the pair have been locked in a struggle for Britain's stockings. If Father Christmas's status rose in the 20th century, Santa Claus has clearly made inroads into the psyche of Britain's children in recent decades; apparently, he has even gained a narrow lead this century. However, even the most ardent Father Christmas fanatic shouldn't panic about this apparent Americanisation of British culture. Arriving from across the Atlantic at the precise moment that our modern Christmas was taking shape in the Victorian era, Santa Claus should be considered as much a part of our traditional celebrations as Christmas trees, Christmas crackers, Christmas cards – and good old Father Christmas himself.

In the spirit of the season, let's call a truce between these jovial icons. This yuletide, if you really want to honour festive tradition, raise a glass to Father Christmas in thanks for your family's feast and the blessings of the season – but make sure to hang out your stocking for Santa Claus. **H**

Thomas Ruys Smith is professor of American literature and culture at the University of East Anglia. His new book is *Searching for Santa Claus* (Boiler House Press, November 2025)

Q&A

A selection of historical **conundrums** answered by experts



A portrait of Confederate general Thomas J 'Stonewall' Jackson, whose love of fruit extended far beyond the yellow citrus

What was Project Acoustic Kitty?

►► During the 1960s, a time of Cold War one-upmanship and paranoia when American and Soviet rockets and spies vied for supremacy, it seemed to each side that there was no such thing as a bad idea – if it would help them gain an advantage. Case in point: in the 1960s, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) launched a project to hardwire and train a cat for espionage.

The research programme, dubbed Project Acoustic Kitty, involved surgically installing listening and recording equipment into a living cat, then sending the unfortunate feline out into the field to linger around enemy agents and pick up their conversations.

A number of challenges arose – not least how to produce a quasi-mechanical moggy that looked normal enough to avoid rousing suspicion. Working with contractors, the CIA developed a transmitter just a couple of centimetres long that could be attached to the cat's skull. The microphone went in the ear canal, the power pack was sewn into the abdomen, and the antenna was woven into the fur along the body and up the tail.

Once everything was in place, the second challenge became apparent:

training. The CIA hoped that, prompted by a few basic audio cues from its handlers, the cat would go wherever it was needed. In practice, it showed little interest in obeying instructions, and wandered off constantly. Further surgeries were performed to try to control the cat's natural instincts.

Five years and – according to former CIA officer Victor Marchetti – vast expense (equivalent to about \$20m today) later, Project Acoustic Kitty was ready for its first mission. The target would be two Soviet officials sitting on a bench outside their embassy in Washington, DC. But, according to one account at least, the operation lasted only a few seconds: as soon as the cat was released, it wandered into the road and was hit by a taxi.

After that risible failure, in 1967 the project was scrapped. All that remains today is a redacted memo, declassified in 2001, entitled 'Views on Trained Cats'. This concluded that the idea "would not lend itself in a practical way to our highly specialized needs" – an assessment that would surprise no cat owners.

.....
Jonny Wilkes, freelance writer

In the 1960s, a living cat was surgically fitted with listening and recording devices by the CIA – with no successful results

Was Stonewall Jackson obsessed with lemons?

►► Confederate general Thomas J 'Stonewall' Jackson was arguably the most formidable commander of the American Civil War, defeating many numerically superior Union forces. Many said that his death in 1863 doomed the fledgling Confederacy.

Lemons are an integral part of his legend. In the popular imagination he was seldom without one – sucking on it meditatively, removing it only to issue a terse order. Even today, admirers leave offerings of the fruit on his grave in Lexington, Virginia.

But was Jackson actually obsessed with lemons? Not really. He liked them, certainly, but this habit was mentioned by only a few writers intent on painting him as a colourful character; people close to him never mentioned it. In truth, he relished many fresh fruits and vegetables as part of his self-prescribed remedy for dyspepsia – or indigestion – a malady that plagued him from his teens.

A brilliant general, Jackson was also a world-class eccentric. Much of the strangeness was related to his dyspepsia. Earlier in life, he restricted himself to a diet that consisted almost exclusively of stale bread. While a cadet at West Point Military Academy, he appalled his room-mates by placing his bread on a shelf and waiting until it reached the proper ripeness. No one from his student years mentioned lemons. Nor did his colleagues at the Virginia Military Institute (VMI), where he taught in the 1850s.

We know from letters that he was buying, growing and consuming fresh fruits and vegetables while at VMI – but peaches, cherries and strawberries were his favourites.

.....
Ben Cleary, retired journalist and teacher

GETTY IMAGES

What are the origins of the Yule Lads?

»» To learn about the *Jólasveinar* (Yule Lads), we must start with their mother, the terrifying ogress Grýla. Her name appeared in Icelandic texts as early as the 13th century, although it wasn't until later that those 13 mischievous lads became associated with her. Folk tales and poems tell how she descends from the mountains with an empty sack to stuff full of children. Grýla owns the monstrous *Jólaöttur* (Yule Cat), which roams the countryside on Christmas Eve, searching for children to gobble up if they're not wearing new clothes.

What, then, of her children, the 13 Yule Lads? Like Grýla and the Yule Cat, variations on these characters and their stories long proliferated around Iceland, but became fixed in their present form in *Christmas Is Coming*, a collection of poems by Jóhannes úr Kötlum first published in 1932.

Since then, the Yule Lads have been rehabilitated and sanitised as mischievous pranksters who deliver Christmas treats to good children.

The first to arrive is Sheepcote Clod, a peg-legged sheep-harasser who appears on 12 December. Each following day, another comes to thief, snoop and generally cause a nuisance – as well as leaving small gifts in shoes placed on windowsills. Their names include Gully Gawk, Stubby, Spoon Licker, Pot Licker, Bowl Licker, Door Slammer, Skyr Gobbler, Sausage Swiper, Window Peeper, Doorway Sniffer and Meat Hook. Eventually, on Christmas Eve, the last Yule Lad – Candle-Beggar – arrives to stalk children and gobble up their tallow candles.

Despite their ruddy cheeks and fluffy beards, this baker's dozen of ersatz Santas has darker origins. As their names and deeds suggest, the Yule Lads play

on the fears and insecurities of an island culture isolated in the mid-Atlantic, with dark winters and sparse supplies. In fact, the Yule Lads were so terrifying that in 1746 a government decree banned Icelanders from practising “the foolish custom of scaring children with the Yuletide lads and ghosts”.

These days, this uncanny family is said to live in Dimmuborgir, a weird and wonderful lava field formed by ancient volcanic eruptions. To encounter the Yule Lads, you should walk between the towering rock formations in December, shouting “*Jólasveinn!*” to draw their attention. But make sure you're wearing new clothes, in case you hear the monstrous meow of a famished feline...

.....
Eleanor Barraclough, reader in public history at Bath Spa University



ILLUSTRATION BY GLEN MCBETH

DID YOU KNOW...?

Food for thought

'Protein Man' was the nickname of an eccentric chap, real name Stanley Green, who walked the streets of central London between 1969 and 1993, carrying a giant placard advertising the benefits of "protein wisdom". His motto was "less lust by less protein": he believed that a low-protein diet would reduce libido and thus somehow make people happier. After his death in 1993, the Museum of London acquired his placards and the pamphlets he had printed to promulgate his ideas.

Seeing double

In his later years, the 18th-century Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus suffered from the delusion that he had a double – a second version of himself who shared his life. This second Carl Linnaeus, whom only he could see, would mirror his activities. On one occasion, he was witnessed opening the door to his university room, looking in and remarking: "Oh, I'm there already." It is likely that Linnaeus experienced a rare psychological condition known as autoscopy or subjective double syndrome.

Title case

Playwright Joseph Farnham was the one and only recipient of an Oscar for Best Writing – Title Cards. When the first Academy Awards ceremony was held in 1929, some films were still silent, using title cards to convey dialogue and describe the action. By the time the next year's ceremony rolled around, nearly all films were 'talkies', so there was no need for the Best Writing – Title Cards category, and it was dropped from the Oscars. **E**

.....
Nick Rennison, writer and journalist specialising in history



The gold-plated Academy Award (or Oscar) statuette has been handed out for nearly a century – but only once for title cards

Is it true that the Roman emperor Claudius was killed by a mushroom?

►► Maybe! That's a cop-out, sure – but the same cop-out that our two main ancient sources took when describing Claudius's death scene.

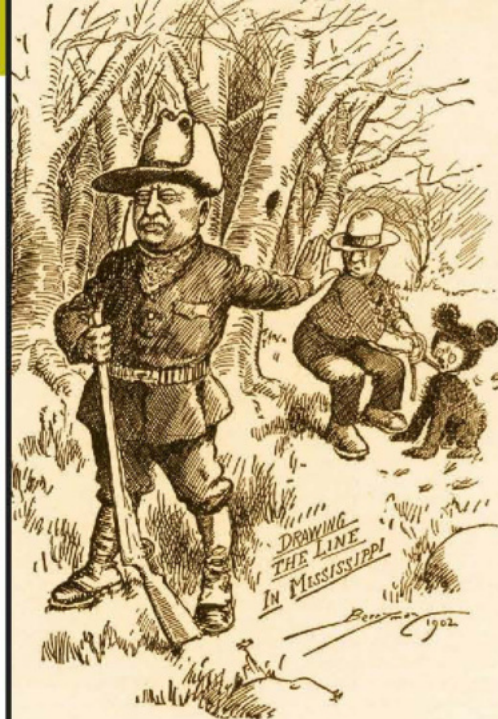
Tacitus and Suetonius, both writing about 60–70 years after the end of Claudius's reign, described slightly different versions of events. Tacitus was sure that Claudius's wife (and niece) Agrippina was to blame, having called on the well-known poisoner Locusta to supply a drug that she then administered to Claudius on an “exceptionally fine” mushroom. However, the poison took too long to take effect – possibly because of the amount of alcohol Claudius had consumed. So Agrippina ordered the emperor's doctor, Xenophon, to take a feather used to induce vomiting, and dip it in poison before using it on the emperor.

Suetonius, on the other hand, was more circumspect. He suggested that the poisoner could have been the emperor's food taster, Halotus, or possibly

Agrippina, using mushrooms followed by a second dose of the poison. Later in Suetonius's work, Nero – Agrippina's son and the successor to Claudius – was also implicated, quipping that mushrooms were “the food of the gods”.

Agrippina's involvement is the common thread in the surviving histories, but we shouldn't ignore the role of storytelling in such accounts. When Rome became ruled by emperors, the perceived power of one man's family – including the women – changed, and writers liked to play with the characterisation of these women as archetypes. Examples included the femme fatale (such as Messalina) and the scheming and overly ambitious mother (in this case, Agrippina). Such stories should be taken with a generous pinch of salt rather than as concrete evidence.

.....
Shushma Malik, associate professor
in classics, University of Cambridge



A version of Clifford Berryman's 1902 cartoon of US president Theodore Roosevelt, whose nickname inspired the term 'teddy bear'

How did the teddy bear get its name?

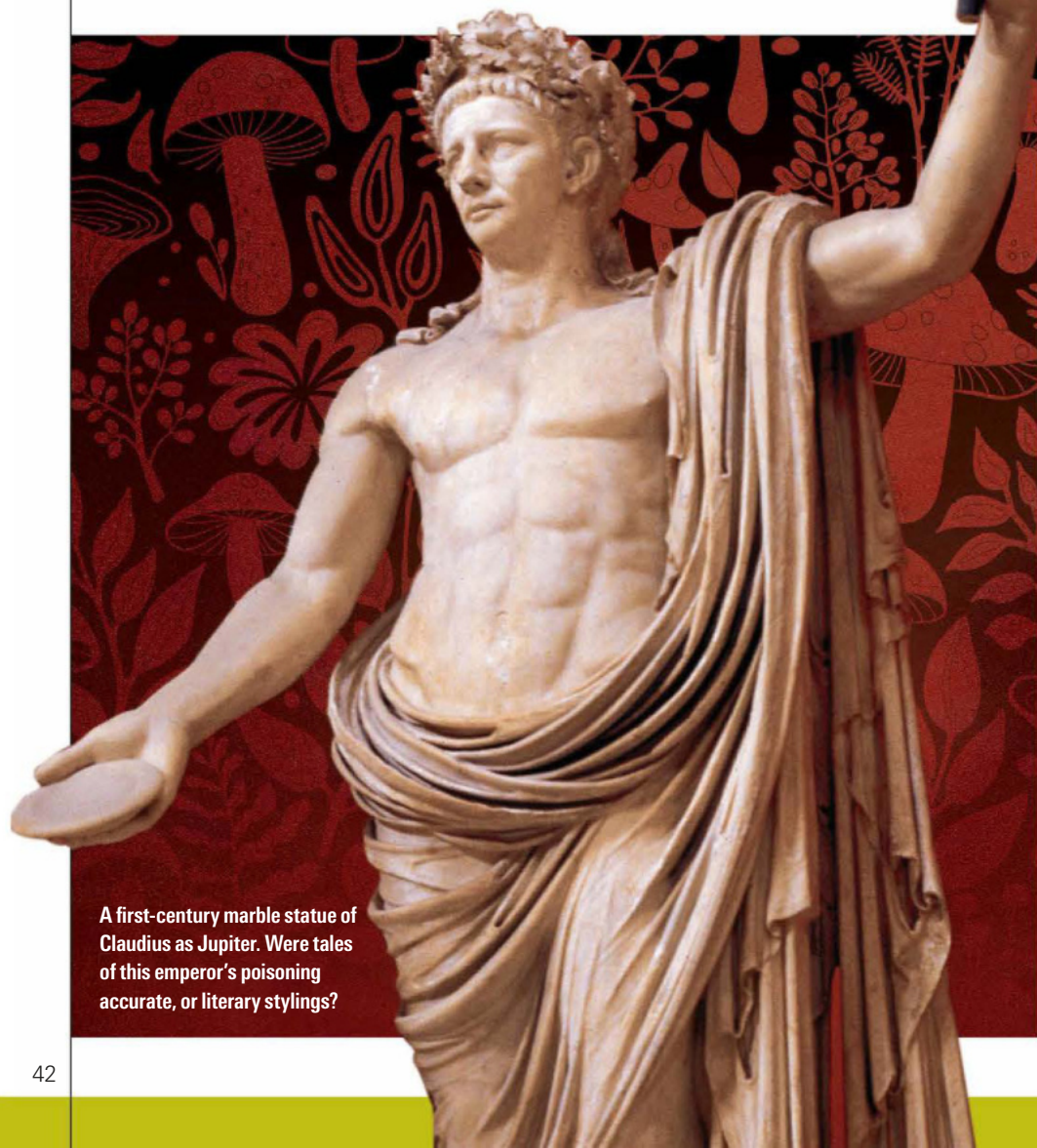
►► Perhaps the question should be: would we have the beloved toy at all if a US president had enjoyed more luck on a hunting trip? Its origins stretch back to November 1902, when Theodore Roosevelt travelled to Mississippi to hunt black bear. After several days with no sign of his quarry, his guide decided to tie an ageing, injured bear to a willow tree to make sure that the president could secure an easy kill. Roosevelt refused, however, insisting that it would not be sporting.

The incident made its way into the newspapers, and inspired political cartoonist Clifford Berryman at *The Washington Post*. He drew the president, who had a well-deserved reputation as an avid hunter, with his back to a defenceless, trussed-up bear.

In turn, Berryman's cartoon inspired Morris and Rose Michtom, owners of a candy store in New York, who made a stuffed toy bear to display in their shop window. They dedicated it to the president, and even received permission to christen their creation after him, using his nickname: Teddy.

Oddly enough, another toy bear was being developed independently at the same time by German company Steiff. Richard Steiff designed his bear with movable joints – and sold 3,000 to an American businessman just in time to take advantage of the Roosevelt story. *JW*

GETTY IMAGES



A first-century marble statue of Claudius as Jupiter. Were tales of this emperor's poisoning accurate, or literary stylings?

Did Japanese emperor Hirohito really love Disney films and characters?

►► He did. In 1975, he even visited Disneyland in California, where he was given a Mickey Mouse watch – of which he was enormously proud. He is said to have worn it regularly after returning to Japan, including on official state occasions.

Hirohito's state visit to the US – the first ever by a Japanese emperor – marked an important moment in the rapprochement between Japan and the west after the Second World War. Disney was an apt part of that process, because Japanese popular culture had been deeply influenced by its cartoons before the war. During the war itself, though, Disney had become involved in making anti-Japanese propaganda, while in Japan all American influences had been banished – fashion, jazz and, very definitely, Disney.

Mickey Mouse became a symbol of the enemy, and was subjected to parody in Japanese propaganda. But by the time of Hirohito's visit to Disneyland, Japanese manga and animation – much of it inspired afresh by Disney via the likes of Tezuka Osamu ('Godfather of Manga') – was beginning to win hearts and minds across the west.

Some in Hirohito's circle must have had concerns about his trip to the US. A visit to Europe a few years earlier had been marred by protests; in the Netherlands, the windscreen of Hirohito's limousine was damaged by a stone thrown by a protester. Yet the



Japanese emperor Hirohito signs the visitor book at Disneyland during his 1975 state visit to the US

reception in the US was enthusiastic in some quarters, and muted rather than angry in others. The emperor's mild demeanour, along with the forward-looking theme of the visit, ended up doing a great deal to enhance US-Japan relations.

What became of the famous watch? Rumours abound. It's said that panic erupted in the imperial household when in 1979 the watch stopped working – as souvenirs are

went to do. Happily, experts concluded that it simply needed a new battery. Then, after Hirohito died a decade later, claims began to swirl that he had been buried with his beloved Mickey Mouse watch. No one really knows – but if it were true, what an extraordinary epilogue to a controversial life.

.....
Christopher Harding, senior lecturer in Asian history, University of Edinburgh



A photo taken shortly after the Boston molasses flood shows the aftermath, with many buildings flattened

What was the Boston Molasses Disaster?

►► Molasses – the sticky, syrupy leftovers from sugar production – can be used to make a wide variety of things, from baked treats and rum to animal feed and industrial alcohol for munitions. That was why, in 1915, with the First World War under way and demand peaking, a colossal storage tank with a capacity of about 8.7 million litres appeared on the waterfront in Boston, Massachusetts.

Shortly after midday on 15 January 1919, the tank burst, sending a tidal wave of molasses surging through the North End district. Several metres high and travelling at 35mph, it obliterated buildings, swallowed cars and horses, and knocked the elevated railway off its tracks. The disaster injured 150 people and killed a total of 21, including two

young children. Though police, fire and military personnel quickly arrived on the scene, rescue efforts were stymied as the molasses cooled and hardened. The clean-up operation lasted for weeks.

In the aftermath, a major class action lawsuit was filed against the tank's owners, United States Industrial Alcohol Company. It claimed that the disaster had been an act of sabotage by Italian anarchists, but the ultimate ruling determined that the tank had been shoddily built with inadequately thin steel. In fact, it had been leaking and groaning for years. The company was ordered to pay \$628,000 (about \$12m today) in damages, and significant changes were made to US industrial regulations. **JW**



TUDOR LIFE

with Ruth Goodman

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This seven-episode course, filmed on location in Plas Mawr, Conwy, explores what life was like for ordinary Tudor people – from the clothes they wore, to the food they ate – guided by historian Ruth Goodman.

About the expert

Ruth Goodman is a historian of the social and domestic life of Britain. She has advised the Royal Shakespeare Company's Globe Theatre and presented a number of BBC television series, including *Tudor Monastery Farm*. She is also the author of several books, including *How to Be a Tudor: A Dawn-to-Dusk Guide to Everyday Life* (Viking, 2015).



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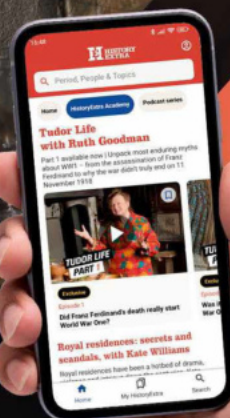
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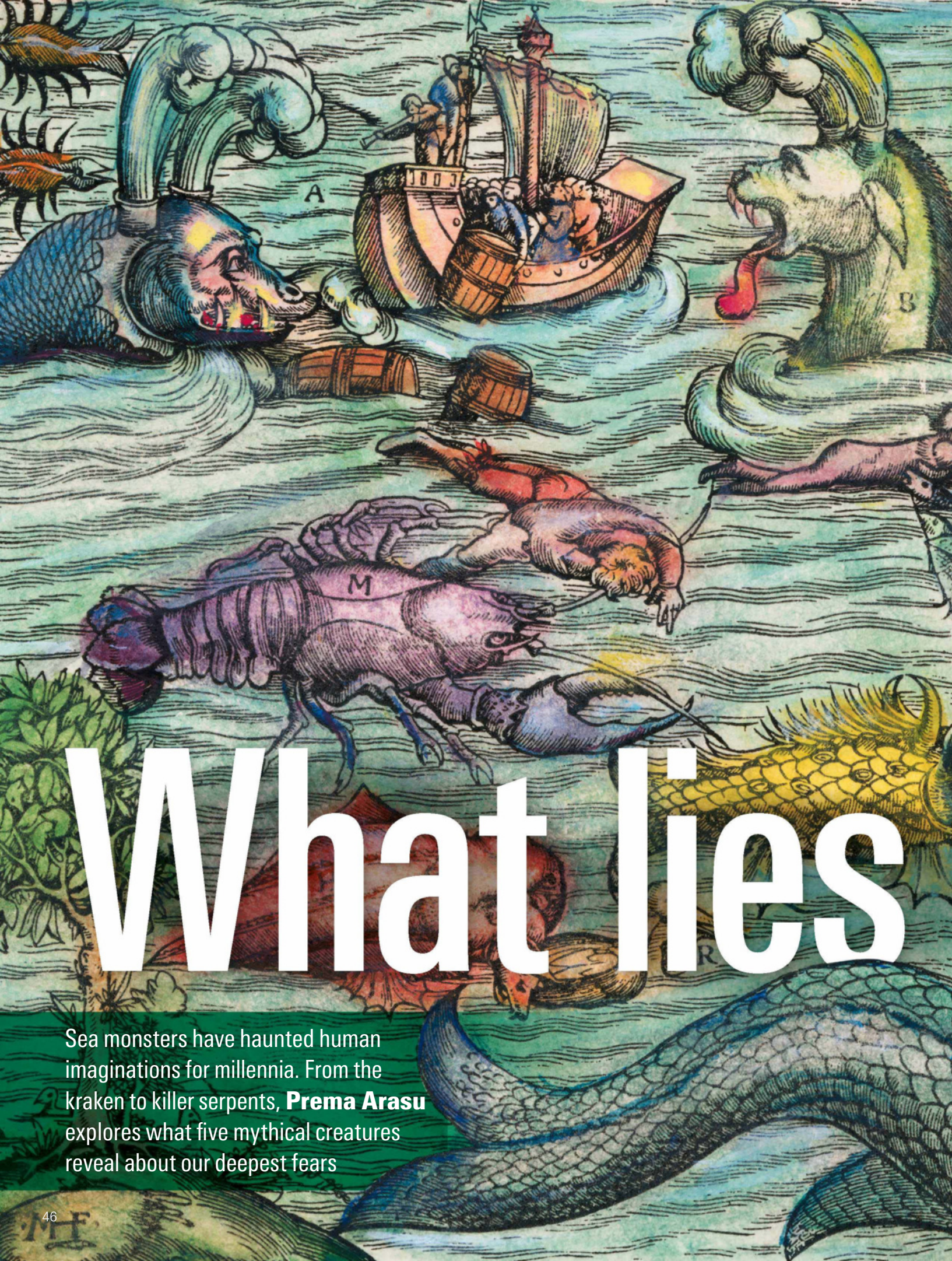


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What lies

Sea monsters have haunted human imaginations for millennia. From the kraken to killer serpents, **Prema Arasu** explores what five mythical creatures reveal about our deepest fears

Fish medley A 16th-century depiction of sea monsters. These creatures have long been a vehicle through which our "anxieties about nature could be expressed, examined and mastered"

beneath

1 Armed and dangerous

The writhing tentacles of the **kraken** inspired horror and disgust

Sea monsters have fired our imaginations – and chilled our blood – for as long as humanity has sailed the seas. The Babylonian epic *Enūma Eliš*, which dates back to at least 1200 BC, describes the creation of the world from two fearsome primordial beings: Apsû, the embodiment of subterranean fresh water, and Tiamat, the sea. Like the many mythical aquatic creatures that have occupied our dreams and our nightmares, Apsû and Tiamat reveal much about how the Babylonians saw the world, acting as projections through which their anxieties about nature could be expressed, examined and, perhaps, mastered.

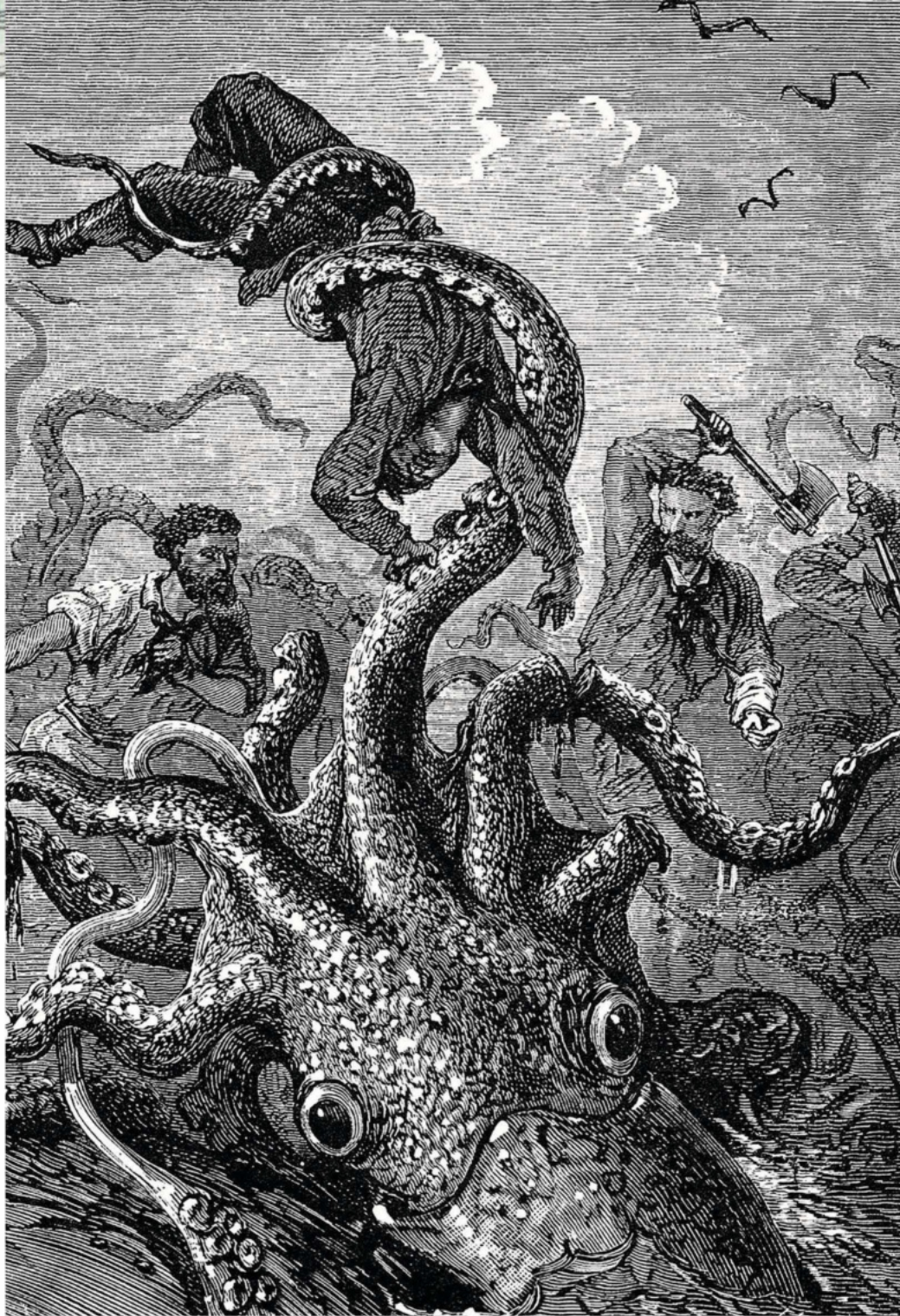
Fast forward more than a thousand years and, in *Naturalis Historia* (c77 AD), the earliest extant work of natural history, the Roman author Pliny the Elder argued that the largest animals found in the sea “exceed in size any of the terrestrial animals” because of the “superabundance of moisture with which they are supplied”.

One such giant creature is the kraken, its origins lying in Nordic mythology and folklore. In his 1752–53 proto-scientific work *The Natural History of Norway*, Danish bishop Erik Pontoppidan described the “Kraken, Kraxen, or, as some world name it, Krabben” as an island-sized creature, “round, flat, and full of arms, or branches”.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson was so energised by reports of this monster of the deep that, in 1830, he wrote a poem in its honour, describing an ancient, giant-armed creature slumbering “Below the thunders of the upper deep; Far, far beneath in the abysmal sea.”

British naturalist Henry Lee offered a more rational perspective. In *Sea Monsters Unmasked* (1883), he stated that kraken sightings by sailors were most likely exaggerated reports of giant squid (*Architeuthis dux*), described a quarter of a century earlier by the Danish biologist Japetus Steenstrup.

Even after that, though, kraken and other squid-like monsters proliferated in literature. Herman Melville dedicated a chapter of



Suckers for punishment An 1870 illustration of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* shows a giant squid engaged in an epic battle with sailors. Monstrous squid-like animals – such as the kraken – have thrilled and terrorised seafaring communities for centuries

Moby-Dick (1851) to the giant squid. Ishmael, *Moby-Dick*’s narrator, references *The Natural History of Norway* in his description of the creature, offering up the possibility that the kraken might not be a mythological beast but a taxonomically recognised species.

Myth and reality continued to amalgamate in the science-fiction genre. Jules Verne’s battle with a giant squid in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1869–70) was based on reports of an encounter between a French corvette, *Alecton*, and a squid in 1861. As

Verne puts it: “Before my eyes was a horrible monster worthy to figure in the legends of the marvellous. It was an immense cuttlefish, being eight yards long... Its eight arms... were twice as long as its body, and were twisted like the furies’ hair.”

The uncanny undulations of kraken continue to fascinate. Roger Luckhurst, a scholar of the field of horror, links this to our innate “response to things that overwhelm our senses, stick too close, ooze across borders, or refuse to keep a stable shape”.



Tempting prospect?

A fourth-century BC urn shows Odysseus sailing towards the sirens, who, he reported, “sit and sing most beautifully in a field of flowers”

2 A feminine fantasy

Aquatic half-humans enchanted men and attracted women seeking new freedoms

Sirens, tritons, nereids, merfolk, nymphs... part-fish, part-human creatures have gone by many names over the millennia. These alluring beings have glided gracefully into cultural traditions across the world for thousands of years – particularly those with strong histories of seafaring. And, unlike many of the aquatic beings on these pages, they haven’t always done so with malign intentions.

In *Naturalis Historia*, Pliny described “tritons and nereids” as creatures in which “the portion of the body that resembles the human figure is still rough all over with scales”.

Sirens had appeared in Homer’s poem the *Odyssey* nine centuries earlier. But in the case of this ancient Greek epic, they were never physically described. Rather, we’re told that they “sit and sing most beautifully in a field of flowers”. Interestingly, they tempt sailors with knowledge, rather than – as other, later, depictions would have it – luring them to their doom. “When we had got within earshot of the land, and the ship was going at a good rate,” the fictional Odysseus recalls, “the sirens saw that we were getting in shore

Homer’s sirens tempt sailors with knowledge, rather than luring them to their doom



A 1930s depiction of Hans Christian Andersen’s *Little Mermaid*, which did so much to popularise the fish-tailed ingénue

and began with their singing: ‘No one ever sailed past us without staying to hear the enchanting sweetness of our song – and he who listens will go on his way not only charmed, but wiser’.”

In medieval art, Homer’s sirens are interpreted as both aquatic and non-aquatic creatures. In contrast, the nereids of Greek myth were explicitly spirits or embodiments of the sea, albeit often visually depicted as human women. In the Romantic and Victorian imagination, they became synonymous with mermaids, frequently depicted with tails. Gothic writer Ann Radcliffe conjured a fish-tailed ingénue in her 1794 poem *The Sea-Nymph*, as did Hans Christian Andersen in *The Little Mermaid* four decades later.

Radcliffe’s poem marked a turn to the mermaid as a feminine fantasy: an aspirational symbol for young women who might otherwise feel confined by the gendered expectations of public life. This manifests today in the enduring visibility of the mermaid in popular culture and in the burgeoning pastime of mermaiding – cosplaying by swimming with a decorative monofin.

Snake bite Laocoön and his two sons are attacked by serpents, as shown in a 16th-century engraving. Could megalophobia – the fear of large objects – be a factor in humanity's obsession with sea monsters?

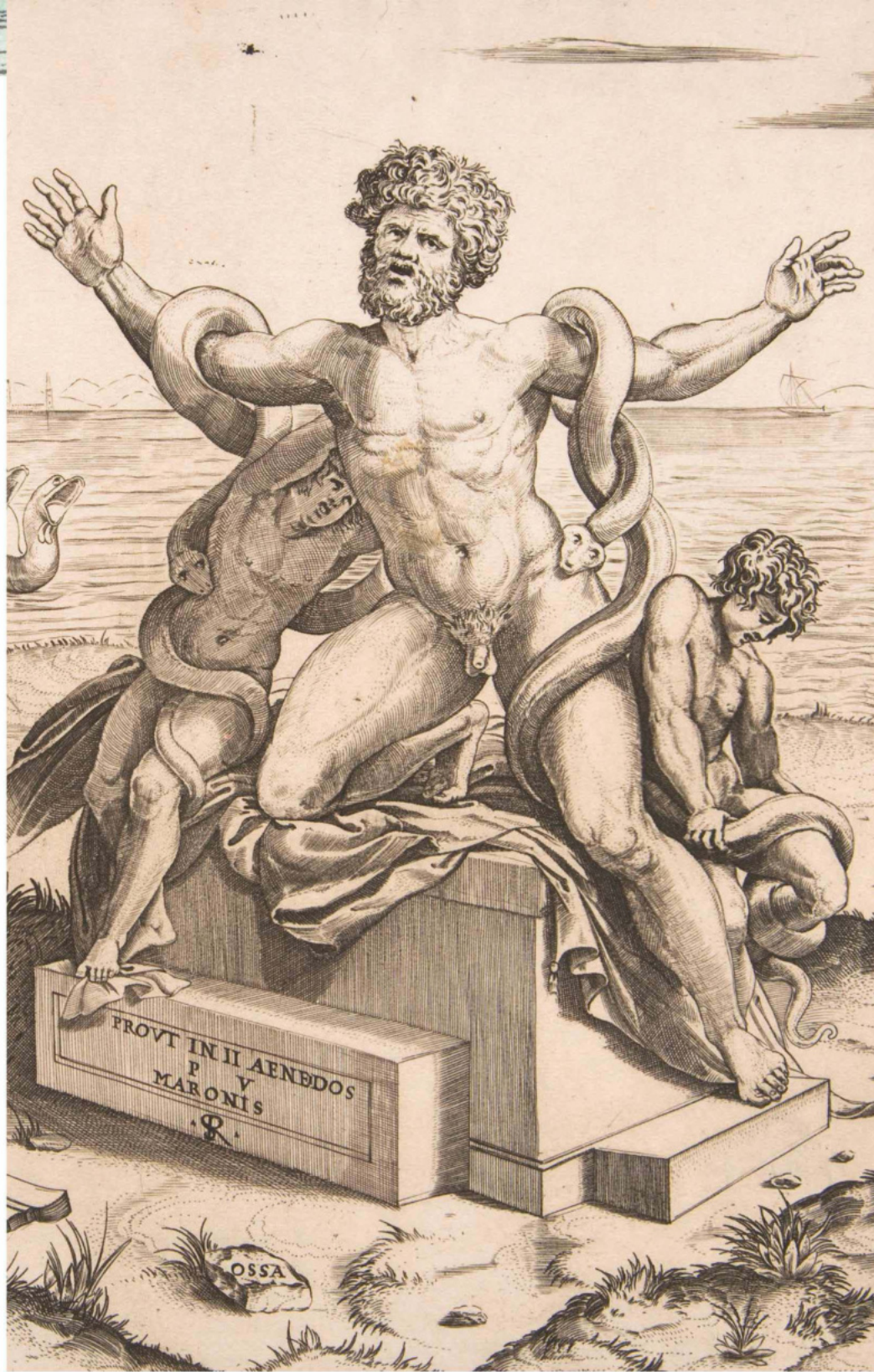
3 Terror in the deep

For millennia, giant, ravenous sea serpents have played on humanity's primal terrors

It didn't pay to get on the wrong side of the gods in ancient mythology. Just ask Laocoön, a Trojan priest who offended the deity Minerva – and didn't live to tell the tale. As the Roman poet Virgil relates it in the *Aeneid* – his epic first-century BC poem telling the story of the foundation of Rome – Laocoön committed the cardinal sin of throwing a spear into the Greeks' wooden horse to show that it was hollow. It was an act that so enraged Minerva that she unleashed two giant sea serpents to eat him.

"Taking swift course; their necks were lifted high," Virgil writes of the ravenous creatures. "Their gory dragon-crests o'er-topped the waves; all else, half seen, trailed low along the sea; while with loud cleavage of the foaming brine, their monstrous backs wound forward fold on fold." Poor Laocoön didn't stand a chance.

As the priest's grisly fate proves, the sea serpent had established itself as a terror of the deep by the time the Greeks and Romans dominated the Mediterranean. But they weren't the first to live in fear of this creature. In fact, the ancient Greeks' diverse bestiary of monsters likely derived from earlier prototypes.



Sea serpents recur in the folklore traditions of a range of coastal and lake cultures, from the black, hairy Nile-dwelling monster *Aman Doger* of ancient Nubia to the rainbow snake of Australian Aboriginal Dreamtime myth.

For the Victorian naturalist Henry Lee, tales of colossal sea serpents were a case of mistaken identity, likely originating in sightings of other marine phenomena – perhaps large pods of porpoises or whales. "I believe

that... the supposed coils or protuberances of the serpent's body, were only so many porpoises swimming in line in accordance with their habit before mentioned," he wrote.

The anthropologist David D Gilmore has offered an alternative interpretation of our sea serpent obsession. He has suggested that the recurrence of such creatures in literature down the ages points to three primal human fears: of the sea; of what might lurk in the unknown; and of large objects, otherwise known as megalophobia.

4 The theory of de-evolution

Early Christians feared that the **Leviathan** would propel the human race back to its watery past

To some, it has been a benign presence. To others, a terror-inducing harbinger of doom. Ever since the Leviathan emerged from the depths of the oceans and floated into the human consciousness, it has meant different things to different people.

Jews and early Christians were certainly fearful. In the Hebrew Bible – where it appears in the Old Testament books of Psalms, Job and Isaiah – the Leviathan is a female sea serpent who will bring about the apocalypse together with her male counterpart, the desert monster Behemoth.

Such ancient beasts played on the enduring fear of regression, reminding us of our uncomfortable origins in the oceans. David D Gilmore suggests that the water that so often drips from primal monsters as they emerge from the deep “symbolises not only the amniotic fluids of the womb, but also the primal element from which all life emerged”. These creatures threaten us with the possibilities of de-evolution – a stripping of what modern science has decided makes us human.

For Renaissance cartographers, the Leviathan meant something different. Medieval maps of the world abound with monstrous-looking whales, depicted in ornate detail. According to historian Chet van Duzer, these illustrations served two purposes: to warn sailors of dangers that awaited them at sea, and as decorative elements designed to show off the artist’s talents.

By the time the American writer Celia Thaxter penned her poem *Leviathan* in 1876, the creature had shape-shifted again. For Thaxter, it was a largely peaceful presence, who triumphed against the rage of nature:

*“For her worst fury he nor stayed nor turned.
‘Twas joy to think in such tremendous play,
Through the sea’s cruelty, all unconcerned,
Leviathan pursued his placid way!”*



How the mighty fell An illustration from a 14th-century manuscript shows Alexander the Great being lowered into the sea to explore the ocean bed – a place populated by aquatic humans, dogs and a huge whale

Such ancient beasts played on humanity’s fear of regression, reminding us of our uncomfortable origins in the oceans



Jaws of victory
A 14th-century depiction of Jonah with the giant fish that spat him out. Huge sea creatures make numerous appearances in biblical texts

Current affair A scene from the 2017 dark fantasy film *The Shape of Water*, which traces the relationship between a mute woman and a captured humanoid amphibian

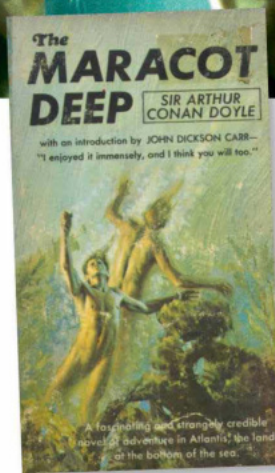
5 Visions of Atlantis

Tales of an aquatic city populated by hyper-intelligent **Atlanteans** enchanted authors from Plato to HG Wells

"A strange vertebrated animal." That's how Elstead, the narrator of HG Wells's 1897 short story *In the Abyss*, describes the lifeform he encounters on a journey into a deep ocean trench. "Two large and protruding eyes projected from sockets in chameleon fashion, and it had a broad reptilian mouth with horny lips beneath its little nostrils," reported the intrepid submariner. "The vertical pitch of its face gave it a most extraordinary resemblance to a human being."

In introducing Elstead to this strange creature, HG Wells was joining a long list of writers to conjure the inhabitants of a mysterious underwater civilisation into fictional life. In fact, the possibility of an intelligent, almost godlike race of aquatic beings living on the ocean bed has captured the imagination for centuries.

Mentions of the submerged island Atlantis date back to Plato's fourth-century BC dialogues *Timaeus* and *Critias*, in which the Greek philosopher described a land sunken by a devastating earthquake. Renaissance scholars such as Francis Bacon linked Atlantis to the Americas, a notion he further explored in his utopian novel *The New Atlantis* (1624). In 1931, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution scientists Henry Bryant



The cover of *The Maracot Deep*, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's tale of a team of scientists who discover the sunken city of Atlantis

and Columbus Iselin embarked upon a research cruise in search of the lost continent around the Azores. It was unsuccessful.

Tales of Atlantis made a resurgence in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's 1929 novel *The Maracot Deep* features a team of scientists who descend into the ocean, become trapped in a deep-sea trench and are saved from disaster by descendants of Atlantis.

Other underseas peoples in popular fiction aren't quite so benign. American horror writer HP Lovecraft described an

undersea race of creatures called Deep Ones who worship the deities Dagon and Cthulhu. In *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* Lovecraft projects his own prejudices about racial purity and miscegenation (sexual relationships between people of different ethnic groups) onto a fictional coastal town. Here the residents interbreed with marine beings and become corrupted in form and character.

The denizens of cities under the sea continue to capture our imaginations today. Guillermo del Toro's Oscar-winning 2017 film *The Shape of Water* tells how a mute cleaner working in a high-security government laboratory falls in a love with a green-skinned humanoid amphibian.

This enduring interest in aquatic beings speaks to a wider fascination with how great civilisations might fall. This is an intriguing and alarming prospect. After all, if a creature is to knock us off our self-appointed perch at the top of the evolutionary ladder, then surely that creature could come from the same primordial soup as we once did? **H**

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20TH CENTURY



Nazism on trial

The latest in our new Sunday Series strand, offering in-depth, multi-part explorations of key historical events and figures, sees writer and legal expert **Philippe Sands** chronicle the genesis, efficacy and legacy of the post-Second World War Nuremberg trials.

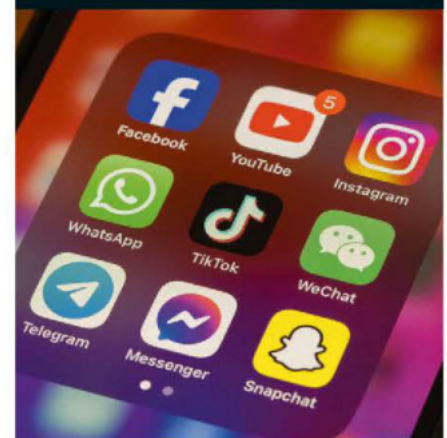
ANCIENT



Gladiators, ready

Our fascination with the ancient arena shows no signs of dimming, as the success of 2024 film *Gladiator II* suggests. **Harry Sidebottom** charts the real experiences of the men forced to fight – and what it tells us about the culture of the Roman empire.

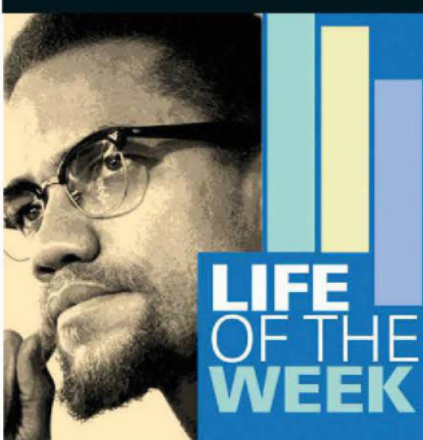
21ST CENTURY



Future proof

How will historians tell the story of the 2020s? What challenges might digital data pose, and how does it differ from the records of prior generations? **John Wills** and **Jane Winters** discuss how future experts will make sense of the 21st century.

CIVIL RIGHTS



Making Malcolm X

He was one of the 20th century's most influential, and most controversial, activists. In this instalment of our Life of the Week series, **Ashley D Farmer** highlights the women who helped shape Malcolm X's ideas and worldview.

EARLY MODERN



Fortune 1500

Soaking a crystal in hen's blood. Popping a pair of lemons under your armpits. Those were just two methods used in the 16th and 17th centuries to foretell the future, as **Martha McGill** outlines in this episode on early-modern divination.

MUSEUMS



Object lessons

The theft of a collection of jewels from the Louvre Museum in Paris hit front pages in October – but how does it compare to other historical heists? **Rana Mitter** and **Hannah Skoda** consider the evidence in this episode of our History Behind the Headlines strand.

Tea and tenors

Audience members sip tea during the interval in a 1943 matinee performance of *La Traviata* at the New Theatre in London's West End. The soaring appetite for opera among all classes fuelled a wartime renaissance in Britain



AIR RAIDS AND ARIAS

Glasgow, 1942. The Carl Rosa Opera Company was in town to perform Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. Tickets had been snapped up by local people – including many who didn't really know what an opera was. The soprano Joan Hammond, who sang the title role that night, later recalled that there were always newcomers in the audience wherever the Carl Rosa performed, searching for something different to do – but also for some kind of transcendental escapism. Invariably, they cheered the singers to the rafters.

Surprising though it may seem to us today, opera was hugely popular during the Second World War.

As the conflict with Nazi Germany raged on, British tram drivers tuned in to Tchaikovsky and waitresses revelled in Wagner. But why? **Alexandra Wilson** explores the surprising Second World War obsession with opera

felt closer to home. Serious times called for serious art, and popular variety shows no longer seemed in step with the national mood.

Workers' playtime

Opera had already enjoyed reasonably wide popularity in Britain during the interwar years. In London, the enterprising impresario Lilian Baylis had set up companies at the Old Vic in the 1920s and Sadler's Wells in the 1930s that were explicitly aimed at fostering a love of opera among local working-class communities. And over in the East End, people could regularly watch operas at the People's Palace, a large entertainment complex on the Mile End Road.

Touring opera companies regularly visited towns and cities around the country, and were eagerly anticipated by people of all social classes. Operatic music could also be widely heard in restaurants, hotel foyers and cinemas, and broadcasting and gramophone records had done a great deal to popularise and democratise the art form.

This was part of a broader surge of interest among the British in the so-called high arts – a sudden and rather urgent desire to 'become cultured' and to enjoy the best that life had to offer – when every day might be your last.

Guy Ramsey reported in the *Daily Mail* in 1943 that "every day in every way Britain's musical and dramatic taste is becoming more and more 'highbrow'". Tram drivers were listening to Tchaikovsky, waitresses were revelling in Wagner, and operas were drawing large audiences at provincial theatres. This war, Ramsey wrote, was more personal than any before it, and



Sadler's Wells singers perform Mozart's *Così fan tutte* in 1945. The troupe was founded to nurture a love of opera in working-class Londoners

Britain's wartime opera boom

But the opera boom of the early 1940s was in a different league.

It would have been logical if opera had ground to a halt during the war, given the large resources conventionally needed to stage performances. To be sure, the most prominent venues did close: the Royal Opera House in London's Covent Garden was turned into one of the most popular wartime dance halls, and Glyndebourne in East Sussex became a home for evacuees from London.

Sadler's Wells soldiered on during the early months of the war, staging matinees to get around the problem of blackouts, but soon enough the Blitz put paid to this, and the theatre became a refuge for the newly homeless. However, the company moved its operations to Burnley and toured extensively from there, putting on works including *The Magic Flute*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Rigoletto* and *La bohème* with a scaled-down cast, piano accompaniment, a simple painted backcloth and a sofa.

The Times praised Sadler's Wells for "Making converts to the art of music-drama" in places such as Oldham, Accrington and Stockport. Performances were so popular that theatres were desperate to book the company. The manager of the Hull New Theatre reported that his postbag was constantly full of letters from audience members "representing a cross-section of the community" who wanted to see the troupe.

Periodically, when it was safe to do so – and even when it wasn't – the company returned to London to perform in the West End. The soprano Elisabeth Parry recalled a performance at the Haymarket Theatre in 1944 when the show went on even while alarms rang and 'Doodlebugs' (V1 flying bombs) could be heard buzzing overhead. Audience members remained in their seats, and the singers and orchestra carried on as if nothing was happening.

The success of the Sadler's Wells tours showed that the British would happily embrace opera if only they were given the opportunity. Journalists expressed frustration that there had never been a move to set up a similar opera company in every major city around the country, because there was clearly plenty of demand. "No doubt there are as many busmen as there are butchers, bakers, baronets and bankers who enjoy a good opera when they can get it," argued *The Times*. And the *Times Literary Supplement* proposed that, with a dozen more companies along the lines of Sadler's Wells, "we should have a genuine art of opera in England as we already have a genuine public for it".

Sadler's Wells worked in partnership with the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA), which also arranged



English operatic soprano Miriam Licette. In 1944, aged nearly 60, she performed arias to Allied forces in the Middle East

The show went on even while alarms rang and Doodlebugs could be heard buzzing overhead

concerts in which professional musicians, including opera singers, performed in factories, air-raid shelters and hospitals. CEMA's broad aim was to "carry music, drama and pictures to places which otherwise would be cut off from all contact with the masterpieces of happier days and times".

Operatic performances also featured in the Holidays at Home initiative organised by the Ministry of Labour, which turned open areas in cities into makeshift seaside resorts, and put on a wide range of entertainments. One such scheme in Liverpool, which included performances of opera, ran for 11 weeks in 1942 and attracted an audience of three quarters of a million.

Arias on the airwaves

Of course, there was also plenty of opera on the radio. In 1941, regular monthly broadcasts of studio operas resumed for the first time since the outbreak of war. The emphasis was primarily on well-known classics such as *La Traviata* and *The Barber of Seville* because,

as the conductor Sir Adrian Boult said, "The evidence is general that the musical public turns to these sources for mental and spiritual recreation more eagerly than ever today." BBC listener research from 1943 revealed that the numbers listening to variety shows were down by 20 per cent, whereas audiences for classical music and serious drama were on the rise.

Victor Hely-Hutchinson, the BBC's director of music from 1944, wrote that one of the few benefits of the war was the rise of an immense public enthusiasm for good music. "Go to an orchestral concert, or a fine operatic performance," he said, "and you will find a corporate appreciation and desire for music of a kind, and on a scale, that has never been seen in Britain before."

Radio broadcasts allowed audiences to enjoy the highest standards of singing, which were not always evident in rough-and-ready touring productions. "Stayed at home tonight to listen to *Faust* – complete – on the wireless," wrote one unnamed office worker in a diary submission for Mass Observation in 1942. "Feel very grateful to the BBC for giving us first-class opera; it is not often we get first-rate opera in Manchester, and there is nothing worse than good music badly executed."

Many people, men in particular, first encountered opera in the forces. Some took

Banging the drum

Peter Gellhorn prepares to conduct the overture to *La Traviata* at the New Theatre in 1943, with the percussion crammed into a box



BRIDGEMAN

part in amateur operatic productions of works such as Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* at military bases in Britain. Others stationed in the Middle East with Paiforce (the Persia and Iraq force) had the opportunity to hear operatic arias in concerts organised by the Entertainments National Service Association. Some of the most respected British opera singers of the day, such as Walter Widdop, Dennis Noble and Miriam Licette, toured that region. But by far the most significant boom in enthusiasm for opera among soldiers was seen in Italy.

In 1944, the *Daily Express* reported that "one of the biggest surprises of our 'invasion' of Italy has been the way the men have become opera fans". Some enterprising army captains reformed the mothballed opera company at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples. Word soon spread that watching opera was a good way to spend an evening, and British troops took to queueing around the block to get tickets.

The 1,600-seat theatre was always full to capacity, and two performances a day had to be scheduled to meet demand. A similar enterprise was also set up at the bomb-damaged and abandoned Teatro Massimo Bellini in Catania, Sicily and, as the Allies moved north, more companies were founded in major cities across the country.



Going for a song

Stools for hire by people queueing for Sadler's Wells Opera Company performances at the New Theatre, 1943. Tickets started at just 1/6 (about £4 today)



Heart of art

A 1940s opera performance in Rome. Many British servicemen first experienced – and came to love – opera while stationed in Italy during the war



Travelling troupe

Servicemen watch a wartime rehearsal by the Entertainments National Service Association, which toured combat zones



Regional voices Singers with the Welsh National Opera in the 1940s. The company made its debut with a double-bill of *Cavalleria rusticana* (a poster for which is shown inset) and *Pagliacci* in 1946



Open for opera Trainee singers outside the newly reopened Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, 1946. Postwar subsidies supported year-round performances



Sun, sea and song Members of the San Carlo Opera Company of Naples perform at a Butlin's holiday camp in the mid-1940s. Classical music was now, so the Musicians' Union declared, "a necessary part of the life of the people"

Naomi Jacob, who in 1948 wrote a book about opera aimed specifically at the soldiers who had come to love it in Italy, recalled that when the idea had first been mooted, there had been a lot of scepticism about whether British and American troops would be willing to listen to opera. But houses sold out in advance, and audience members often came back several times. Jacob reported that “no better audience ever existed... they were punctual, they gave rapt attention, and their appreciation was unstinted”.

From September 1943 to the end of the war, countless British servicemen watched performances of opera in Italy. The composer and broadcaster Spike Hughes reported that “in every town the same thing happened: the British soldier took to grand opera as if it were in his blood”.

Exposure to Italian opera in Italy helped soldiers to become more discerning listeners. In Britain before the war, opera was performed in English translation everywhere except Covent Garden and Glyndebourne, two ‘luxurious’ venues that sat apart from the national norm. But here, suddenly, was an audience that had shown itself perfectly capable of appreciating opera in the original language.

The Rome correspondent for the *Sunday Express* reported that “an ‘opera-conscious’ audience is being created for Britain after the war, but if any theatre magnate wants to cater for them he must offer something better than a third-rate touring company”.

Optimism for opera

Hopes were high, then, for what Britain’s operatic landscape might look like in the postwar period. Even the most sceptical commentators were coming round to opera: the *Daily Express* reported that “the most ridiculous art-form ever invented” was “proving more popular than anybody ever imagined”.

Of course, many people who had encountered opera in pared-back productions during the war had no idea what it really could be. The public was, as *The Liverpool Daily Post* put it, “as ignorant of the real taste of opera as a wartime infant is of the taste of bananas”. But appetites had been whetted, and Britons emerged from the war wanting to see not only more opera but better opera.

To a large extent, these expectations were met. The theatre director Tyrone Guthrie argued after the war that London was becoming the musical centre of the world, with opera at its heart. In the autumn of 1947, audiences in the capital had the opportunity to watch no fewer than 23 different operas performed by five companies.

A new company based at the Cambridge

Theatre in Seven Dials performed Italian opera in Italian to groups of former servicemen and West End shopworkers. For a while, even glamorous Covent Garden presented a form of “opera for the people”, running regional auditions and recruiting talented opera-singing coalminers, secretaries and milkmen as soloists for a new company.

Some of these initiatives were only short-lived. Even so, there was very much a buzz in the air around opera after the war, with the Musicians’ Union declaring in 1947 that classical music had become “a necessary part of the life of the people”. The wider acceptance of opera as bona fide popular entertainment seemed to be summed up by the fact that when the San Carlo Opera Company from Naples visited just after the war, it performed not only at Covent Garden but also at Butlin’s holiday camps in Filey and Skegness.

Sadler’s Wells, meanwhile, made a triumphant return to its Islington home, where on 7 June 1945 it staged the premiere of Benjamin Britten’s *Peter Grimes* – a rapturously received work that seemed to signal a hopeful new beginning for British operatic composition. New troupes formed to take touring opera around the country in the late 1940s. The 1940s also saw the foundation of Welsh National Opera – a group of talented amateurs at the outset but later a major player on the British operatic scene.

Perhaps most importantly, thanks to the huge explosion of interest in the high arts that had taken place during the war, the nation was far more open-minded towards the possibility of funding it afterwards. Up to

The San Carlo Opera Company from Naples performed not only at Covent Garden but also at Butlin’s holiday camps



English National Opera singers perform Wagner’s ‘Ride of the Valkyries’ at Glastonbury in 2004. Despite various efforts, opera has now largely receded from the mainstream cultural conversation

this point, public subsidy had only ever been a pipe dream. Now CEMA provided a model for the new Arts Council of Great Britain, which leaned heavily towards favouring opera. Thanks to subsidies, opera could be staged at Covent Garden year-round rather than just for a three-month summer season, and prices could be kept low. The Arts Council also undertook local measures to foster music-making and music appreciation, setting up clubs in workplaces and lending gramophone records. Meanwhile, opera featured prominently on the BBC’s new Third Programme.

“Fifteen years ago I should have felt obliged to defend opera as a form of art,” said the critic and academic Edward J Dent in a lecture delivered at Liverpool University in 1945, “but that is no longer necessary.”

Opera continued to be enjoyed by large, socially mixed audiences through the 1950s, sixties and seventies, and was drawing record audiences in the eighties and nineties. But by those later decades, the media had begun to circulate a simplistic idea that opera was elitist, and by the turn of the millennium the idea was so entrenched that it was deterring newcomers to the genre. Opera was also becoming more expensive, declining on television and disappearing from the school curriculum.

Today, opera still has something for everyone, but it has receded from the mainstream cultural conversation. Regrettably, it has become necessary, once again, to defend it as a form of art. ■

Alexandra Wilson is a senior research fellow at Jesus College, University of Oxford. Her latest book is *Someone Else’s Music: Opera and the British* (Oxford University Press), published in September

Elizabeth Marsh

The corsair's captive

Taken hostage by a Barbary ship's captain in the 18th century, a young Englishwoman found herself fighting for her freedom in Marrakech. **ADAM NICHOLS** introduces a brave captive who later wrote a book about her dramatic experiences

The Barbary corsair ship appeared suddenly on the horizon, bristling with cannon. Its decks swarming with armed men, it sliced through the waves at a clip that its quarry – the British merchant ship *Ann* – could not match. At that time, in the mid-18th century, such pirate attacks were violent, bloody affairs; if the *Ann*'s captain tried to resist, he would be risking the lives of his crew, his passengers and himself, and would likely see his ship sunk. He surrendered.

The corsair captain swaggered aboard the British vessel without firing a shot, and surveyed his captives. He was one of the infamous Sallee Rovers operating out of Salé, on the Atlantic coast of Morocco, who sold any Europeans they captured into slavery. The captain ordered the *Ann*'s four passengers to be taken to his ship, along with the crew, who were chained up in the hold. One of the passengers was a young Englishwoman named Elizabeth Marsh, barely 21 years old. It is because of her that we know these details. She later published an account of her experiences: *The Female Captive: A Narrative of Facts Which Happened in Barbary in the Year 1756, Written by Herself*.

The corsair attack occurred in August 1756, a few months after the beginning of the Seven Years' War. Marsh's father, an administrator for the Royal Navy, had moved his family from their home in Menorca to Gibraltar, which he considered safer. To further protect his daughter, he then booked her a berth on the *Ann*, which set sail for England in late July.

Marsh's family aspired to be "respectable people", and she had received a genteel education. The future planned for her was typical of young women of her position and era: to marry a well-to-do man and bear his children.

Now, torn from that sheltered life, she faced a very different fate. As a young, attractive European woman, Marsh would have been a highly sought-after commodity in north African slave markets – one that any Moroccan sultan would be very interested in acquiring for his harem. The corsair captain kept Marsh isolated – not for her comfort but to keep her safe and unmolested. One of the other passengers, an English merchant named James Crisp, had been tasked by Marsh's father with looking after her; he convinced the corsairs that he was her brother, so they permitted him to stay by her side.

African captivity

After a week at sea, the corsairs reached Salé. There, the British party was housed in a dilapidated building for several uncomfortable and uncertain days. Their situation was complicated. In 1750, England and Morocco had concluded a treaty of mutual cooperation, and were trading partners, with Morocco supplying beef to the British garrison in Gibraltar. However, the Moroccans found the treaty unsatisfactory, and had also been incensed by what they considered to be the disrespectful actions of a British emissary who had attended an audience with the sultan while wearing muddy boots.

Marsh and her companions were, technically, hostages rather than outright captives. But the British feared that Sidi Mohammed ben Abdallah, the Moroccan sultan's son and heir, might live up to his reputation and take an amorous interest in Elizabeth Marsh. And that is what happened. Marsh and her companions were taken to Marrakech, Sidi Mohammed's home city – a journey of some 300 miles across rough, mountainous country. On the way, Marsh and Crisp received some advice from a friendly slave: they should now claim to be husband and wife.

Sidi Mohammed was in his forties. His father was aging and sick, and Sidi Mohammed would soon inherit the sultanate. For all his power, though, he could not force Marsh into his harem. The Qur'an's Chapter 4, Verse 24 decrees: "Forbidden to you are women already married, except those whom your right hand possesses" – that last clause being a

// The future planned for Marsh was typical of young women of her position and era: to marry well //



Elizabeth Marsh was the first English woman to write a full-length Barbary captive narrative. Her book detailed her time at the hands of corsair pirates in Morocco in 1756, including an accidental conversion to Islam

ILLUSTRATION BY SUE GENT

euphemism for slaves. Marsh was not a slave so, if she and Crisp successfully maintained the fiction of their marriage, Sidi Mohammed could not take her for his harem.

Before the acting sultan

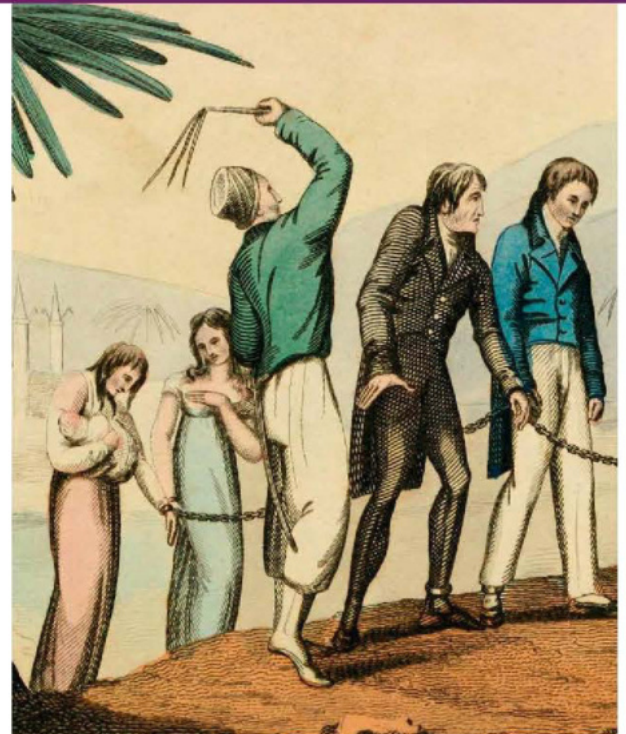
In Marrakech, Marsh was housed with the other English captives in a house in the town, hostages in the ongoing negotiations between the Moroccans and the English. She was quickly brought before Sidi Mohammed, though, alone and still dishevelled from her long journey. He grilled her about her marriage, observing that married English women customarily wore wedding rings – which she did not. Marsh declared that she had taken off her ring for safety during her voyage. He was not convinced, but he allowed her to depart and rejoin the other captives.

At their next meeting, Sidi Mohammed – dressed in a pink satin vest with diamond buttons – presented Marsh with “a great collection of rarities” and told her that, as she recounted it, “he did not doubt of my preferring, in time, his palace to the confined way of life I was then in... and that the curiosities I had seen should be my property”.

Marsh declined this offer. Sidi Mohammed, used to having his own way, was not pleased. But then something unexpected occurred. A woman who was in the room started talking to Marsh, using a phrase in Arabic and making encouraging gestures for her to repeat it, which Marsh did. “Too late,” she wrote, “I discovered that I had renounced (completely innocently) the Christian religion by saying in Morisco: ‘There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is His prophet.’”



A 19th-century illustration of the Moroccan port of Salé, earlier the base for infamous corsairs who attacked European ships and sold passengers and crew into slavery



Between the 16th and 18th centuries, Barbary slave traders captured many Europeans and enslaved them in north Africa, as shown here

Marsh was now in real trouble, having unintentionally recited the *Shahadah* – and thus converted to Islam. According to Qur’anic law, this automatically invalidated her Christian marriage to Crisp, making her fair game for Sidi Mohammed. The Prince, as Marsh refers to him, then resorted to threats. Here is her account:

“Throwing off the mask he had hitherto worn, he cruelly informed me that I had renounced the Christian faith and turned Mohometan [Muslim], and that a capital punishment – namely burning at the stake – was, by their laws, inflicted upon all who recanted from... their religion.

“The shock of this pronouncement was severe... I assured the Prince that, if I was an apostate, it entirely proceeded from my being tricked, and not from my own inclination, and that if my death would give him any satisfaction, I no longer desired to avoid that last and final remedy to all my misfortunes, for to go on living under the terms he proposed would only add to my misery.

“The Prince seemed greatly perplexed by my resolute declaration, and, though he continued his importunities, yet it was now more with the air of a suppliant than that of a sovereign.”

Marsh’s language does not really do justice to the drama of the situation. Sidi Mohammed, the second most powerful man in Morocco, threatened to have her burned at the stake if she refused to join his harem. Alone and defenceless, Marsh faced him down and dared him

to do it. Baffled by such unexpected and indomitable resistance, Sidi Mohammed capitulated and let her rejoin the other captives.

Release and return

The political tensions between Britain and Morocco were eventually resolved – in part by the arrival of a British warship – and Marsh and her companions, along with the *Ann*’s crew, were allowed to depart.

Marsh returned to England, where she married James Crisp. However, Crisp went bankrupt and fled to India to try to revive his fortunes, leaving Marsh behind with two small children. Without any means of support, she went to live at her parents’ home in Chatham, Kent. Desperate for money, she resorted to writing a memoir of her captivity in Morocco. Marsh eventually joined her husband in India, where she travelled widely. She died there of breast cancer at the age of 50, surviving a mastectomy without anaesthetic but then succumbing to the disease.

Her memoir, *The Female Captive*, is the first full-length Barbary corsair captivity narrative written by a woman in English. The book enjoyed some notoriety when it was first published but was never a bestseller, and only a single copy is known to survive. If that copy had disappeared, we would likely never know Elizabeth Marsh’s remarkable story.

Marsh was not famous. She played no role in world events. Hers was a private life. Yet the courage she showed during her Moroccan ordeal is an example of how ordinary people can do extraordinary things. **H**

Adam Nichols is a historian and writer. His latest book is *Corsairs and Captives: Narratives from the Age of the Barbary Pirates* (Pen & Sword, 2024), featuring Marsh’s full account

// Sidi Mohammed threatened to have Marsh burned at the stake if she refused to join his harem. She dared him to do it //

IT WOULDN'T BE
Christmas
WITHOUT
RadioTimes

ON SALE 9 DECEMBER



RadioTimes





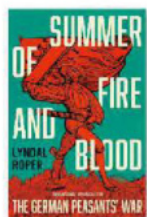
In the roster of laudable history books published this year, authors tackled topics as diverse as Gaza, Indian partition, extinction, medieval and Stuart monarchs – even historians themselves. Here, a panel of experts recommend the titles they most enjoyed

COMPILED BY **DANNY BIRD**

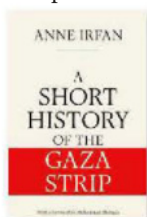
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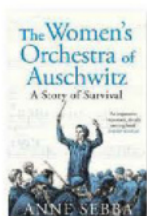
Hannah Skoda



Did you know that Thomas Müntzer, leader of the German Peasants' War in 1525, used a rainbow flag to rally his followers? It's an aptly exuberant image for the radical charisma of Müntzer, and for the hope and vision of the peasants. Religious change seemed to open up new ways of thinking about oppression and exploitation for those rebellious upstarts. In *Summer of Fire and Blood: The German Peasants' War* (Basic Books), Lyndal Roper works with sources mostly hostile to the peasants, but the result reads with nuance and acuity. We get a real sense of ordinary people longing for justice and a fairer set of relations to the land, alongside the sheer terrors of this war, which was put down with great ferocity.



Anne Irfan's *A Short History of the Gaza Strip* (Simon & Schuster) is a wonderfully informative account of the complexities of the situation. Beginning in 1948, she guides us through these tangled events with great clarity, drawing on a vast array of sources. The text is nuanced, humane and critical at a time when too many assumptions and untruths are floating around. It might helpfully be read alongside the new podcast series *Empire: The History of Gaza*, presented by William Dalrymple and Anita Anand, which explores Gaza's deep history stretching back more than 4,000 years.

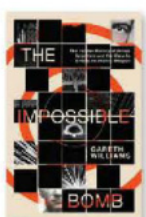


The Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz: A Story of Survival (Weidenfeld & Nicolson), by Anne Sebba, is an intensely moving book. At one point, the women's orchestra at the Auschwitz II-Birkenau camp was led by Alma Rosé, niece of Gustav Mahler and an extraordinary musician in her own right. This music-making saved the lives of around 40 of the orchestra's members.

Hannah Skoda is associate professor of medieval history at the University of Oxford



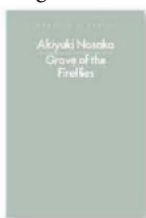
Christopher Harding



A host of Second World War anniversaries this year highlighted the enormous part played in that conflict by new and ever more destructive technologies. Gareth Williams' *The Impossible Bomb* (Yale University Press) opened my eyes to the role of British science in the development of nuclear weapons. He takes us from trepidation among scientists in the 1930s, through the breakthroughs and political machinations that shaped what came next.



In *Rain of Ruin: Tokyo, Hiroshima and the Surrender of Japan* (Allen Lane), Richard Overy reminds us that incendiaries caused far greater destruction in Japan than the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Tested in the US on Japanese-style wooden architecture, they killed 100,000 people in Tokyo in a single night's bombing in March 1945. Overy's book includes an excellent discussion of the reasons behind the timing of Japan's eventual surrender, cautioning us not to overestimate the role played by atomic weapons – the Soviet declaration of war on Japan, a day before Nagasaki, was also hugely significant.



Finally, one of Japan's greatest war novels arrived in translation, highlighting the often overlooked cost to children of the Second World War. Akiyuki Nosaka's *Grave of the Fireflies* (Penguin Classics) may already be familiar from Studio Ghibli's animated adaptation of 1988 – undoubtedly the most harrowing film I've ever seen. Thanks to Ginny Tapley Takemori's translation, English-speaking readers can now follow the lives of siblings and war orphans Seita and Setsuko as they are forced to navigate, largely alone, the darkness and chaos of Kobe after large parts of it are laid waste by firebombing.

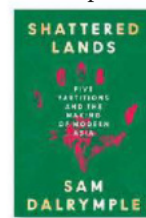
Christopher Harding is senior lecturer in Asian history at the University of Edinburgh



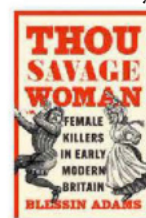
Alice Loxton



In *A History of England in 25 Poems* (Allen Lane), Catherine Clarke roams from raging battlefields to royal courts, and darts from the Great Fire of London to the Miners' Strike, on a literary tour through English history. We unpick the words of *The Peterborough Chronicle*, Thomas Wyatt, John Dryden and Lord Tennyson, to name just a few. It is a charming mix of history, travel and literature, inspiring the reader to set forth to discover the English countryside – and to reread the poems aloud at the sites that inspired their creation.



In his remarkable debut, *Shattered Lands: Five Partitions and the Making of Modern Asia* (William Collins), Sam Dalrymple skilfully examines how the Indian empire – a vast dominion stretching from the Red Sea to the jungles of south-east Asia – was divided into 12 separate nation states between 1931 and 1971. By dissecting this complex past, he shows how the map of modern Asia was made. It is a vast subject, but Dalrymple has achieved the perfect balance of academic excellence and brilliant storytelling.



In *Thou Savage Woman: Female Killers in Early Modern Britain* (William Collins), the historian and former police officer Blessin Adams unpicks the evidence relating to a succession of historical murders, trawling pamphlets, ballads and woodcuts littered with clickbait tales of traitorous wives, greedy mistresses, child killers and malicious witches. And she offers a compelling verdict: society was both repulsed by and attracted to this murderous female rebellion, and – as is so often the case when we interrogate the sources – the truth is far more complex than it first seems.

Alice Loxton's new book is *Eleanor: A 200-Mile Walk in Search of England's Lost Queen* (Macmillan)



Late great The skull of a mammoth. Sadiya Qureshi's book "examines the long history of extinction, from the dinosaurs to endangered species today", says Olivette Otele



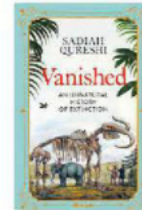
Last notes Author Anne Sebba (right) with Hilde Grünbaum, then one of the last surviving members of the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz, in 2022. Sebba's account is "intensely moving", says Hannah Skoda



Long division Soldiers of the British Indian Army and British officers, 1937. Sam Dalrymple's book explores how an empire that once stretched across and beyond south Asia was split into 12 nation states over four decades. With it, he has "achieved the perfect balance of academic excellence and brilliant storytelling", says Alice Loxton



Olivette Otele



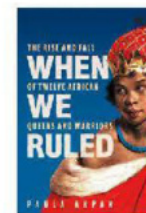
Extinction, often linked to climate change, continues to be a hotly debated issue. Yet, as Sadiya Qureshi argues, it has been the result of political decisions made long before the heavy industrialisation of the

20th century. *Vanished: An Unnatural History of Extinction* (Allen Lane) examines the long history of extinction, from the dinosaurs to endangered species today. She demonstrates that the classification and hierarchisation that were at the heart of colonial projects extended to living beings.



The illusion that the world can be remoulded by human will becomes reality in Janina Ramirez's outstanding *Legenda: The Real Women Behind the Myths That Shaped Europe* (WH Allen). This is not a

mere retelling of well-known stories of medieval figures; instead, the author reclaims the narratives previously imposed on those women, unveiling their personal lives. This book disrupts established views on legendary women by uncovering the extent of their agency on their own lives and their influence on various kingdoms.



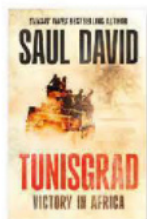
Expanding on key figures who shaped women's history, *When We Ruled: The Rise and Fall of Twelve African Queens and Warriors* (Trapeze) shifts our attention from Europe. Paula Akpan's beautiful

prose helps us navigate emotions provoked by these women's little-known yet incredible trajectories, providing enlightening insights into power, diplomacy and war in African kingdoms. These female rulers had to fight for their people while navigating the treacherous waters of ancient civilisations' polities. From Nigeria to South Africa, we learn that if greed and fear hinder progress, a leader's faith in her abilities and in her community can bring great rewards.

Olivette Otele is distinguished research professor of the legacies and memory of slavery at SOAS University of London



James Holland



Saul David is one of my favourite historians writing today, and his latest book, *Tunisgrad: Victory in Africa* (William Collins), is brilliant. The Tunisian campaign was a pivotal moment in the Second

World War – a period when the Allies sussed out how to work together and to harness air, land and sea power effectively to beat the Axis. Saul's new book is compellingly told and fills a big hole in the popular narrative of the war



Phil Craig co-authored *Finest Hour*, a book about 1940 and the Battle of Britain published 26 years ago, which had a profound influence on me and my own writing. His new book, *1945: The Reckoning*

(Hodder & Stoughton), casts fresh light on not only the end of the fighting in the Second World War but also the changing world that emerged and the mayhem that followed, which was often disturbingly violent. Focusing on a number of fascinating individuals, Craig follows a range of unexpected and diverse characters. I never knew, for example, that the British actually used Japanese troops to quell insurrections in south-east Asia in late 1945.



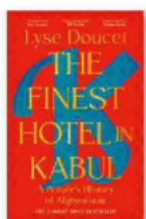
Charlie Higson's *Willie, Willie, Harry, Stee: An Epic Short History of Our Kings and Queens* (Mudlark) is the most enjoyable and utterly joyous account of our monarchs I've ever read.

There's no lack of research here, but he writes with terrific energy and verve, adding fabulously quirky observations and small details. The illustrations by Jim Moir (aka Vic Reeves) are superb – look at George V with his tattoos, for example. I can't think of a better Christmas history book – one that I would so loved to have read as an impressionable teenager!

James Holland's latest book, co-authored with Al Murray, is *Victory '45: The End of the War in Eight Surrenders* (Bantam, 2025)

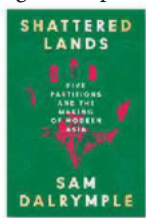


Kavita Puri



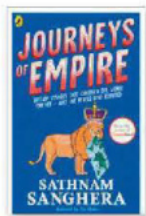
Lyse Doucet's *The Finest Hotel in Kabul: A People's History of Afghanistan* (Hutchinson Heinemann) recounts that country's turbulent history over the past 50 years. Readers view it through the prism of the

'Inter-Con' hotel and the people who've worked there, including the first female chef, as well as the guests who pass through. It is a poignant and, at times, tragic history of ordinary lives set against the background of royal rule, coups d'état, foreign invasions and two Taliban regimes, the current iteration of which the UN has called a "gender apartheid" state.



Sam Dalrymple's *Shattered Lands: Five Partitions and the Making of Modern Asia* (William Collins) looks at the vast Indian empire and its break-up. As recently as 1928, it

encompassed countries known today as India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan, Yemen, Oman, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait. Though the partition of 1947 is well known, the others are less familiar, yet Dalrymple explains how we continue to live with their ramifications and the empire's legacy. This is an impressive, ambitious debut, deeply researched and with a storyteller's eye for detail.



How we teach history to the next generation is something I think about a lot. Sathnam Sanghera's children's book *Journeys of Empire: British Voyages that Changed the World Forever – and the Rebels*

Who Resisted (Puffin) would make an excellent Christmas gift, guiding younger travellers to India in the company of royalty, and across the Atlantic with a young enslaved man. They will ascend mountains never before climbed, and visit places that the west never realised existed.

Kavita Puri is a journalist and broadcaster. Read her latest column for *BBC History Magazine* on page 16 of this issue



Peace party Crowds in London cheer Japan's surrender in 1945. Phil Craig's book about that year "casts fresh light on not only the end of the fighting... but also the changing world that emerged", says James Holland

Thinking big Saint Augustine of Hippo, in a 15th-century portrait. This theologian, subject of a book by Catherine Conybeare, was one of the most influential early Christian thinkers



Power of speech An orator at Speaker's Corner, Hyde Park in the early 1960s. Reading Fara Dabhoiwala's book about the history of free speech helps with "understanding the controversial origins of the concept", says Josephine Quinn



Facing the past A 19th-century Japanese woodcut of a kabuki performer. Christopher Harding's volume examines "the role of cultural and material history including the Japanese traditions of theatre and ceramics" in that country's story, says Rana Mitter



Rana Mitter



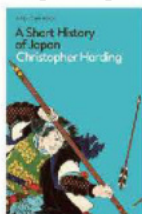
The Forrest Gump of Asia? Not quite – but the life of Huang Chin-tao, as explored in Anna Beth Keim's *Heaven Does Not Block All Roads* (Hurst), reflects many of the turning points in the modern

history of one of the most controversial places on the continent: Taiwan. Huang was a soldier under Japanese occupation during the Second World War, a political prisoner for years under Chiang Kai-shek's dictatorship, then a fighter for democracy in what has now become perhaps Asia's most liberal state. Using archives and interviews married with sparkling prose, Keim tells a compelling story of historical significance.



Another Asian life story to fascinate is that of Xi Zhongxun. A powerful figure in the rise to power of the Chinese Communist Party under Chairman Mao, his son Xi Jinping now rules China. Joseph

Torigian's superb biography, *The Party's Interests Come First* (Stanford University Press), reveals the deeply conflicted nature of the elder Xi: an ardent atheist revolutionary who developed a successful (at first) relationship with the Dalai Lama, and a reformist who was an unbending martinet at home. He was purged in 1962, sending his young son Jinping into exile – and helping shape the path of the 21st century.



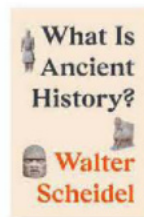
Meanwhile, across the sea sits Japan. The perfect introduction to that intriguing society is Christopher Harding's lively new *A Short History of Japan* (Pelican). Starting with prehistory, Harding

explores the importance of Buddhism, the path to modernisation and, in particular, the role of cultural and material history, including the Japanese traditions of theatre and ceramics. The book is short, yes – but its scope is long, deep and rich.

Rana Mitter is ST Lee professor of US-Asia relations at the Harvard Kennedy School and the author of *China's Good War* (HUP, 2020)



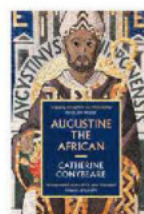
Josephine Quinn



As a harried academic whose only hobby is missing deadlines, I mostly end up reading books from last year, but sometimes a recent publication makes it to the top of my pile – or, even better, turns up as an

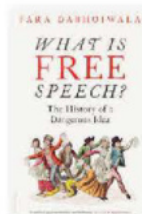
advance proof.

The best book that's been published about my own field this year – indeed, for many years – is Walter Scheidel's *What Is Ancient History?* (Princeton University Press). It's a lot of fun, identifying the origins of the modern, idiosyncratic equation of antiquity with Greece and Rome in a dual 19th-century move towards scholarly specialisation or 'dismemberment' and away from notions of non-European ancestries. There's a manifesto, too – not for a return to the past but for a new understanding of pre-modern history not simply as 'ancient' but as 'foundational' for the contemporary world, worth studying in its own right and on a global scale.



Also among books within my field, I'd single out Catherine Conybeare's *Augustine the African* (Profile). This short and readable biography explains the bishop of Hippo's thinking in ways

that even I could understand, and situates it, unusually, in his own local experiences growing up in north Africa and then, after a confusing period of travel in Italy as a young man, returning there for good.



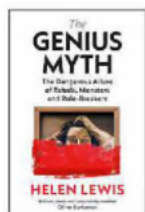
Further out of my own comfort zone, I enjoyed Fara Dabhoiwala's *What Is Free Speech? The History of a Dangerous Idea* (Allen Lane). I'd never known what to think about the political

obsession with free speech on both left and right, so understanding the controversial origins of the concept was very helpful in forming a clearer – and more negative – view of my own.

Josephine Quinn is professor of ancient history at the University of Cambridge



Onyeka Nubia



The soul of a species is under scrutiny in *The Genius Myth: The Dangerous Allure of Rebels, Monsters and Rule-Breakers* (Jonathan Cape), Helen Lewis's dissection of human rebels. In it she

offers a 21st-century decoding of an 18th-century notion of 'eminent men' – and it works. It works for 'us', because historical morality is revisionist. But enemies and heroes are socially constructed, and future generations will baulk, aghast at 'our' moral imperatives. Perhaps rebels seduce because they represent an alluring aspect of the human psyche. It could be argued human hegemony exists because of *Homo sapiens'* capacity to bend the laws of nature.



Perhaps the idea of home-grown terrorists shocks the system because of manufactured prejudices about who such people are. European terrorism is sometimes offered as an aberration – a 'rare'

phenomenon – an approach that has influenced portrayals of the Red Army Faction. In *The Revolutionists* (Bodley Head), Jason Burke defies this intellectual virtue-signalling of 'western' values, unpicking the Faction's forcible entrance into European politics. He holds up a mirror to the Baader-Meinhof gang's fears of a Fourth Reich – a fear that they felt could justify any action.



Moudhy Al-Rashid's *Between Two Rivers* (Hodder Press) is a love letter to the Tigris and Euphrates. However, he carefully distances himself from environmental determinism, which may

offer the 'magic' of civilisation as only a matter of geographical location, boldly and eloquently debunking an obsession with 'eastern origins' and orientalism. This is a fine read – historical non-fiction that flows like the best poetry.

Onyeka Nubia is assistant professor of history at the University of Nottingham



Tracy Borman



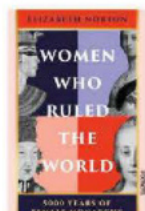
James VI & I was a contradictory, often misunderstood character. Only by shining a light on his private life do we glimpse the real man behind the regal mask. That is what Gareth Russell does

in *Queen James: The Life and Loves of Britain's First King* (William Collins), told with the author's characteristic verve and exquisite eye for detail – a stunning achievement and a must for history fans.



Alison Weir's *Queens at War: England's Medieval Queens* (Jonathan Cape) is a gripping new account of England's medieval queens that brings a dazzling cast of characters – from the formidable Margaret of

Anjou to more shadowy figures such as Anne Neville, consort of Richard III – vividly to life. These are women who broke the mould, wielding power not just as the wives of kings but in their own right. In doing so, they shaped the course of English history. Britain's bestselling female historian has a back catalogue most authors can only dream of, so the queens' stories are in safe hands.



Women Who Ruled the World: 5,000 Years of Female Monarchy (Footnote Press) by Elizabeth Norton is a gripping and beautifully crafted book that skilfully interweaves the stories of

female rulers who, on the face of it, have little in common but their sex. As well as introducing the reader to lesser-known characters – Tamar of Georgia and Lili'uokalani of Hawaii, for example – it provides a fresh perspective on famous figures such as Cleopatra and Elizabeth I. There is a striking contemporary resonance, making even the distant past seem within touching distance. This is a book that effortlessly encompasses a breathtaking span of time, geography and personalities.

Tracy Borman is the author of books including *The Stolen Crown* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2025)



Challenging figure Gertrude Stein, writer and US expat in France, pictured in 1935. Francesca Wade's biography is "a fresh, intimate and deeply compelling portrait", says Leah Redmond Chang



Mother tongues Tuareg women singing at a festival in south-eastern Algeria. Luke Pepera's book exploring African histories, cultures and traditions presents a novel view of the continent

Controversial king

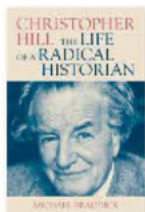
James VI & I, pictured in 1621. Gareth Russell's book shines fresh light on a "contradictory, often misunderstood character"





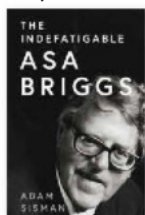
Richard J Evans

Biographies of historians aren't always terribly interesting: we are a tribe that usually does little except sit in archives, libraries, seminar rooms and lecture halls. But sometimes you can find colleagues whose lives are more active and perhaps a bit more interesting than the run-of-the-mill. I certainly struck it lucky with Eric Hobsbawm (1917–2012), whose personal archive included a vast mass of diaries, letters, manuscripts and much else besides, which I used for my 2019 biography.



Two more lives have appeared this year that tell us a lot about the historical profession and its wider social and political context. Michael Braddick's *Christopher Hill: The Life of a Radical Historian*

(Verso) had to contend with its subject's rather private nature. However, like Hobsbawm, Hill (1912–2003) was for years kept under surveillance by MI5, and maintained a voluminous correspondence. Braddick is himself a distinguished expert in Hill's main field, 17th-century English history, and authoritatively assesses his subject's contribution.



Asa Briggs (1921–2016) is the subject of another absorbing biography, *The Indefatigable Asa Briggs* (William Collins), written by Adam Sisman, author of previous lives of Alan Taylor and

Hugh Trevor-Roper. With classic works including *Victorian People* and *The Age of Improvement*, Briggs did more than anyone to rescue the Victorians from what another radical historian, Edward Thompson, called "the enormous condescension of posterity". Both Hill and Briggs wrote gracefully and addressed themselves to a wide readership – an example to us all. Unlike Hobsbawm, however, both men took top managerial roles in higher education institutions – perhaps to the detriment of their actual historical work.

Richard J Evans' latest book, *Hitler's People: The Faces of the Third Reich* (Penguin), is now available in paperback



Leah Redmond Chang



There is something magical about handling objects in the archive: through them, the past just comes to life. But in Mathelinda Nabugodi's expert hands, the relics of the 19th-century Romantic past take

on startling new meanings. *The Trembling Hand: Reflections of a Black Woman in the Romantic Archive* (Hamish Hamilton) is a genre-defying book blending essay, memoir and keen historical analysis. Above all, it is a conversation between a historian and a sometimes hostile archive – a meditation on how history gets made, and by whom.



Joe Dunthorne set out to write the story of his Jewish great-grandfather's escape from Nazi Germany but, through persistent digging, discovered a story far more complex than the one he had imagined. *Children of*

Radium: A Buried Inheritance (Hamish Hamilton) begins as a personal memoir but unfurls into a much broader history, revealing how individual people and nations cling to certain stories for the sake of moving forward – often at a steep cost. It's both a family tribute and a cautionary tale.



Maybe, like me, you drifted in confusion through one of Gertrude Stein's books at university, or vaguely recall her as the bossy *salonnière* in Woody Allen's 2011 film *Midnight in Paris*. In her own time, though, she was

a cutting-edge writer, a savvy patron of artists, a Jewish American who survived in the heart of Vichy France, and a woman devoted to her lover Alice B Toklas – who in turn fiercely protected Stein's literary legacy after her death. Francesca Wade's *Gertrude Stein: An Afterlife* (Faber & Faber) is a fresh, intimate and deeply compelling portrait. Who would have thought that a biography of Gertrude Stein would keep me up late reading? But this is page-turning stuff.

Leah Redmond Chang is the author of *Young Queens: Three Renaissance Women and the Price of Power* (Bloomsbury, 2023)



Peter Frankopan



I hugely enjoyed Oliver Moody's *Baltic: The Future of Europe* (John Murray), a brilliant blend of history and reportage – as well as a primer for why this area is central to the world of tomorrow. Much of this

region has spent time, energy and thought working out how to address disinformation, hybrid threats, defence readiness and institutional adaptability – and the book urges that others learn from these lessons, too.



I was riveted by Giuliano da Empoli's *The Hour of the Predator: Encounters with the Autocrats and Tech Billionaires Taking Over the World* (Pushkin Press), which assesses change in today's world

with terrifying clarity. As translated by Sam Taylor, Da Empoli has a wonderful turn of phrase and is an astute picker of historical parallels. Most of today's leaders are like the Aztecs, he writes, unable to confront reality. Some, though, are like Cesare Borgia – men who believe that they can bend the world to their will and shape it in their own image.



Luke Pepera's *Motherland: A Journey through 500,000 Years of African Culture and Identity* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson) is another ambitious and expansive book by a first-time author. Pepera

starts his investigation deep in the past, looking at themes ranging from migration to oral traditions, matriarchal societies to ancient empires. Blending history, anthropology and memoir, he restores agency and depth to the continent's story, from chapters about ancient empires to oral traditions and modern diasporas. Rejecting colonial frames, he shows Africa not as a passive backdrop to global history but as one of its enduring creators and moral centres. **H**

Peter Frankopan is professor of global history at Oxford University. His books include *The Earth Transformed* (Bloomsbury, 2023)

ENCOUNTERS

DIARY By Jonathan Wright and Charlotte Vosper
HISTORY COOKBOOK Medieval gingerbread
EXPLORE Warwick Castle, Warwickshire
CITIES Bath, UK

TV

End times

Why do civilisations that dominated their epoch fail? In an era of autocracy, climate change, the rise of AI and a first-hand understanding of how deadly pandemics can be, it's a question that seems pertinent.

In which case, now might be a good time to look to the past for lessons, which is precisely what this new BBC series, a companion to *Civilisations* (2018), does. Each of the four shows focuses on one civilisation's fall: Rome, Egypt under the Ptolemies, samurai-era Japan and the Aztec empire. The programmes look at what happened through the prism of art and culture, and feature artefacts held at the British Museum. Expect an impressive lineup of famous experts and dramatic reconstructions.

Civilisations: Rise and Fall

BBC Two / Monday 24 November



BBC



BBC Two's *Civilisations: Rise and Fall* features significant objects from the British Museum including Mōri samurai armour, and (left) a wooden turquoise double-headed serpent from the Aztec empire



What's on this week?
Visit historyextra.com for updates on
upcoming history TV and radio programmes



EXHIBITIONS

**The Last Days of Pompeii:
The Immersive Experience**

Immerse LDN / Until 15 March 2026 /
pompeii-experience.com

Delve into the culture of daily Roman life, witness the momentous eruption of Mount Vesuvius, and follow its fallout in Immerse LDN's new exhibition.

In a blend of cutting-edge technology and vivid storytelling, this exhibition launches visitors into Pompeii's rich history with recreations of the ancient city's beautiful pre-eruption landscape, a 360-degree virtual reality Roman amphitheatre experience, and a digital metaverse recreating Pompeii's 'Villa of Mysteries'.

Spies, Lies and Deception

IWM North / 29 Nov 2025 – 31 August 2026 /
iwm.org.uk

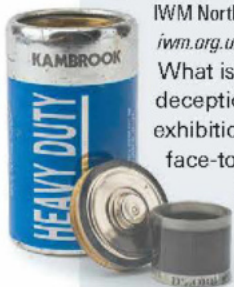
What is the price of espionage and deception? IWM North's latest exhibition brings its audience face-to-face with this question as it guides you through the history of espionage since the First World War. With tales of ingenious plots, quirky gadgets (such

as a hollow battery, pictured left), and (previously) secret documents, the exhibition highlights the human impact of the dangerous world of spying.

**Emergency Exits: The Fight for
Independence in Malaya, Kenya
and Cyprus**

IWM London / Until 29 March 2026 /
iwm.org.uk

Discover the brutal battles for independence in Malaya, Kenya and Cyprus which helped shape the postwar world in an IWM London exhibition. Via the thoughts and experiences of those on both sides of the conflicts, the exhibition explores the motivations for independence in the former imperial territories and the British authorities' responses, as well as their attempts to keep evidence under wraps. **13**



Tobias Menzies stars in *A Ghost Story for Christmas: The Room in the Tower*, Mark Gatiss's adaptation of a spooky tale from 1912

The Imperial War Museum's new exhibition *Emergency Exits* explores three countries fighting for freedom from British rule during the 1950s



TV

Trouble ahead

Mark Gatiss's adaptations of classic ghost stories have become highlights of the festive schedules. Eighth time around, the writer and director has chosen to bring a 1912 story by EF Benson to the screen, a genuinely eerie tale relocated to the years between the two world wars.

At the centre of events is Roger Winstanley (Tobias Menzies), who has for 15 years been haunted by a recurring dream of being invited to stay at the home of an acquaintance, only for events to turn nightmarish. Could this be a premonition? Adding gravitas to proceedings, the drama also stars Dame Joanna Lumley.

**A Ghost Story for Christmas:
The Room in the Tower**

BBC Two / December

TV

Frontier friction

Set in Washington Territory in 1854, *The Abandons* is a Western that's unusual for having two matriarchs, women whose lives become entangled, at its centre. Lena Headey (*Game of Thrones*) plays Fiona Nolan, a tough Irish-woman who heads a found family of orphans. Gillian Anderson of *X-Files* fame plays the altogether posher Constance Van Ness.

Two crimes, a terrible secret, an illicit romance and land hugely valuable because of silver deposits all feature in an action-drama created by Kurt Sutter (*Sons of Anarchy*). It's also a series that, according to executive producer Chris Keyser, deals with an age-old theme: "How do you stay good in a bad world?"

The Abandons

Netflix / Streaming from Thursday 4 December



Gillian Anderson stars as the wealthy matriarch Constance Van Ness, vying for power in 1850s Washington Territory, in Netflix's *The Abandons*



The newly sober Lorenz Hart (Ethan Hawke) falls for Yale student Elizabeth Weiland (Margaret Qualley) in Richard Linklater's *Blue Moon*

FILM

On the skids

Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II's smash musical *Oklahoma!* opened on Broadway on 31 March 1943. Among those in attendance was lyricist Lorenz Hart, whose own partnership with composer Rodgers, which brought the world such standards as 'Manhattan' and 'My Funny Valentine', had floundered because of his alcoholism.

It's an evening recalled in the latest film from director Richard Linklater (*Boyhood*), a character-driven comedy-drama called *Blue Moon*. Ethan Hawke, almost unrecognisable because of an appalling comover, plays Hart as a campy wit, but also as someone humiliated when he realises his former writing partner has co-penned a monster hit. Andrew Scott stars as Rodgers, who in real life grew understandably exasperated with Hart's unreliability.

Blue Moon

In cinemas from Friday 28 November

RADIO HIGHLIGHTS

Personal stories

It's 30 years since the signing of the Dayton Accords, which officially brought the Bosnian War to an end. Even in the context of the bloodstained breakup of the former Yugoslavia, this was a conflict notorious for its ethnically charged brutality. Among those who witnessed the violence at first hand was Vanessa Lloyd-Davies, a doctor who served with the British Army and who volunteered to go to a besieged Sarajevo in June 1992.

During her time in the city, the United Nations sent an aid convoy to Goražde, a town surrounded by the Bosnian Serb Army. Vanessa was the convoy's medic. But as her sister, the documentarian Fiona Lloyd-Davies, remembers in

Archive on 4: Battle of the Drina (BBC Radio 4, Saturday 13 December), the armoured personnel carrier in which Vanessa travelled went over a mine.

A firefright and a night in a ditch followed. In 2005, Vanessa took her own life and Fiona is sure her traumatic experiences that day contributed to this tragedy.

Also in the *Archive on 4* slot, **FOOC at 70** (Saturday 6 December) marks seven decades of Radio 4's *From Our Own Correspondent*. The show is based around an event held at the BBC Radio Theatre, chaired

by *Today's* Anna Foster, and featuring the insights of such heavyweight foreign correspondents as Jeremy Bowen, Lyse Doucet, Steve Rosenberg and Kate Adie.

In **A Ghost Story for Christmas** (Saturday 20 December), the novelist and academic Katherine Rundell celebrates the tradition of telling spooky stories in the bleakest midwinter. Her interviewees include Professor John Mullan and Jeanette Winterson.

The nuclear-themed **The Bomb** (BBC Sounds & BBC World Service) returns on Monday 1 December. This time around, as the series title **Kennedy and Khrushchev** suggests, the focus is on the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.

Finally, as we approach Christmas, **Witness History** (BBC World Service) offers a series of toy-themed shows, beginning with **The Creation of Jenga**, which features an interview with the game's British designer, Leslie Scott. **H**



Archive on 4 explores the tragic fate of doctor Vanessa Lloyd-Davies



The National Trust's Cragside property in Northumberland is recreating a servants' ball from 1894 this festive season

TV

Seasonal special

In a festive episode of the fly-on-the-wall series, cameras go behind the scenes as teams prepare National Trust properties for Christmas. At Cragside, a Victorian Tudor-revival mansion in Northumberland, there's a recreation of the 1894 servants' ball. This was an occasion when, Lord of Misrule style, those who lived 'downstairs' were temporarily in charge.

At the genuinely Tudor Cotehele mansion in Cornwall, the gardeners spend

much of the year preparing for Christmas, gathering and drying thousands of flowers in the spring for a 60ft Yule garland.

Also in the West Country, the Arts and Crafts-style Coletton Fishacre in south Devon is celebrating its centenary, which is surely more than enough of an excuse to throw a 1920s-themed party featuring festive cocktails.

Christmas Treasures of the National Trust

BBC Two / Friday 19 December



Sara Cox follows model makers' efforts to recreate treasured moments from eight people's pasts

TV

Small pleasures

Memory is imperfect, but what if you could get a professional model maker to recreate a moment from the past? A few lucky souls don't need to imagine what this might be like. That's because a new eight-part BBC daytime series, a programme that riffs off our collective fascination with dolls' houses and train sets, follows what happens when expert miniaturists work with those who want to visualise family and childhood stories.

Each show follows a process of briefing, research and creation, all leading up to a big reveal. How accurately have the miniaturists recreated a treasured moment? Presented by Sara Cox. **H**

The Marvellous Miniatures Workshop

BBC One / From December



You can preside over a Romanised city of brick and marble, or one that feels more rooted in local traditions

GAMES / Rule like a Roman

JAMES OSBORNE meets the makers of a new game that offers you the chance to govern a conquered settlement at the height of Rome's power

Anno 117: Pax Romana

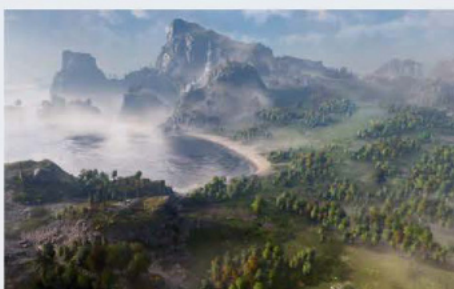
Ubisoft Mainz/ £49.99

At its height in AD 117, the Roman empire stretched from the sun-baked sands of Egypt to the wind-lashed shores of Britannia. It was the scope and scale of the empire that posed such complex choices to those who led it, and it's those challenges that *Anno 117: Pax Romana*, Ubisoft's new city-builder, seeks to capture.

"The death of Emperor Trajan [shown below right] in AD 117 marked a moment of stability, relative peace and prosperity," historian Thierry Noël tells us, explaining why this specific year was chosen for the game. He worked closely on the project, researching and consulting to find a balance between entertainment and authenticity. "The empire was consolidating its hold on conquered territories, and the process of Romanisation was accelerating." That period of consolidation makes for a fascinating canvas.

The latest entry in Ubisoft Mainz's long-running strategy series allows you to step into the boots of a Roman governor, overseeing trade, production and expansion, shaping the infrastructure and identity of your settlements. Yet from the outset, *Anno 117* asks how far the Roman banner should reach. Do you impose imperial order by draining marshes, raising villas and importing the bread and wine of the south, or adapt to local life, cultivating reeds, cheese and beer?

It's a conceit grounded in history – as



The "wild and hostile" province of Albion promises to push players' powers of diplomacy to the limit

the game's portrayal of second-century AD Britannia shows.

"Albion was still a fringe of the empire," Noël explains, "a territory where Romanisation confronted the long-established Celtic traditions. That dynamic was something we wanted to explore." *Anno 117* captures that tension through its dual settings. As governor, you're tasked with choosing between ruling Latium, with its classical grandeur of olive groves and aqueducts, or Albion, which Matt Cook, senior game writer, describes to us as "a wild and hostile province, characterised by its misty marshes and wet, wet rain".

The difference between those two settings is emphasised by the game's most striking feature, which is its cultural choice system. As your population grows, houses can evolve into either Romanised or native Celtic dwellings, each with its own visual

style, needs and social benefits. The more Romanised citizens crave imported luxuries – mirrors, fine wine, exotic baked goods – while Celts prefer an emphasis on local produce, faith and traditional crafts.

The line you choose to walk between these competing desires shapes not just your economy but also the feel of your cities. A Roman metropolis of brick and marble feels ordered and assertive, while a Celtic settlement of wattle-and-daub, reed farms and timber boardwalks feels rooted in harmony with the landscape.

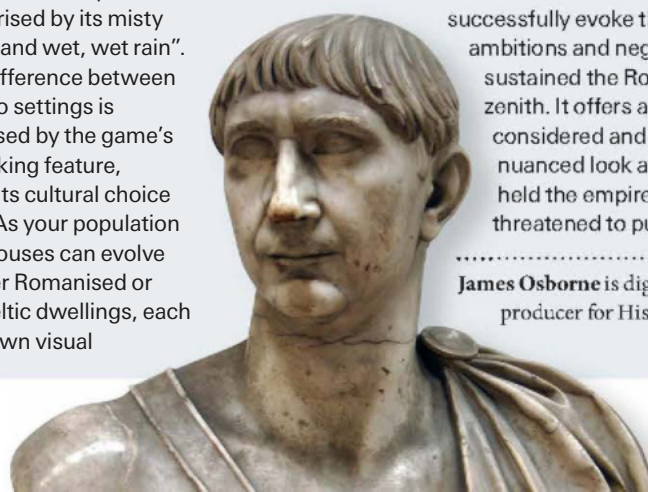
In practice, those choices extend far beyond aesthetics. Each culture's economy draws directly from its environment. Albion's marshes are rich but precarious, demanding careful management of timber and space, while Latium's fertile valleys provide abundance, but invite overreach.

Through all this, Noël is careful to note that *Anno 117* is "a history-inspired game" rather than a simulation. Cook agrees, saying the intention was "never to replicate the history, but instead to try to capture the spirit of the age".

As Noël puts it, *Anno 117* "is a call to curiosity, discovery and cultural enrichment". The entertainment aspect is also key. Cook explains that he wanted players to be able to "engage with historical ideas through play, rather than ever feeling that they are being lectured to."

In all, *Anno 117: Pax Romana* does successfully evoke the compromises, ambitions and negotiations that sustained the Roman world at its zenith. It offers a refreshingly considered and satisfyingly nuanced look at the choices that held the empire together, and threatened to pull it apart. **H**

James Osborne is digital content producer for HistoryExtra



RECIPE

Medieval gingerbread

ELEANOR BARNETT recreates a spicy treat originally cooked up for special occasions during the Middle Ages



Medieval gingerbread was typically enjoyed at fairs and other social celebrations

Warm, spicy and special, gingerbread is a favourite festive treat. Tchaikovsky's classic Christmas ballet *The Nutcracker* features an army of gingerbread men. And gingerbread houses, which originated in Germany – some inspired by the edible witch's house in the dark fairytale 'Hansel and Gretel' – have been baked and decorated for Christmas since at least the 19th century.

Medieval gingerbread bears little resemblance to these more modern treats, though. Ginger and other spices were expensive in medieval Europe, so were used mostly in dishes prepared for special occasions. In the early recipe recreated here, honey and breadcrumbs are mixed with spices to make a paste. Decorated with red sandalwood – an early red food colourant – cloves and boxwood leaves (which are poisonous, so omitted here!), the soft sweet was then sliced and served. Other early recipes using ground almonds produced a white gingerbread.



Gingerbread houses have been popular at Christmas in Germany and Austria since the 19th century

Originating in south-east Asia, ginger arrived in Europe along the spice roads. It reached ancient Rome, where it was used not just as a foodstuff but in perfumes, cosmetics and remedies. Medicinal use continued into the Middle Ages in Europe, where ginger was used to treat problems ranging from trapped wind to poor eyesight. A reference from 1574 describes "a kind of cake or paste made [with ginger] to comfort the stomacke".

In the dominant Galenic system of medicine of that era, the body was thought to contain four 'humours' influencing behaviour and health: blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile. Foods, believed to act on the body to produce these humours, were characterised as 'hot', 'cold', 'dry' and 'wet'. Gingerbread was 'hot', useful for counteracting chills but also considered an aphrodisiac because it would 'heat' up the loins. Our use of the word 'hot' to mean 'spicy' is a legacy of that ancient medical belief system.

By the 17th century, the honey in gingerbread was being replaced by treacle, a by-product from the sugar-refining industry. It became more readily available in Britain as the empire expanded, using enslaved labour to grow sugar on plantations, particularly in Caribbean colonies. Breadcrumbs might also be replaced with flour, and eggs could be added, too.

Gingerbread biscuits shaped like men and women came to be sold at communal celebrations such as fairs – indeed, the moulds were known as 'fairings'. Long beloved as a special treat, it's easy to see how gingerbread would come to be associated with the major festivities surrounding Christmas.

Why not try the medieval version of gingerbread this Yule? It's sweet, pretty and a great way to use up leftover bread. 

Serves: 4-6
Difficulty: 1/10
Time taken: 20 minutes

INGREDIENTS

175g honey
85g white breadcrumbs (stale or dried)
½ tsp ginger
½ tsp cinnamon
Pinch saffron
Pinch ground pepper
½ tsp sandalwood powder (or a drop of red food colouring)
Whole cloves to decorate

METHOD

1. Spoon honey into a saucepan and bring to the boil. If using unclarified honey, skim foam or solids off the surface.
2. Keeping the pan on a low heat, stir in the breadcrumbs, spices and colouring.
3. Once a dough has formed that is hard to stir, roll between two pieces of parchment paper using a rolling pin to about 1cm thick. Remove the paper and allow to cool.
4. Slice into squares and decorate each with a clove.



Eleanor Barnett is a food historian at Cardiff University. She is the author of *Leftovers: A History of Food Waste and Preservation* (Apollo, 2024), and posts @Historyeats on Instagram

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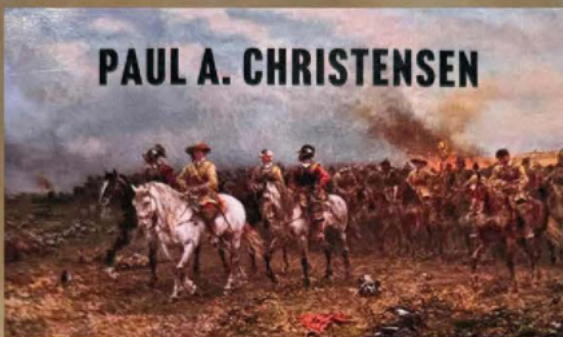


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If walls could talk

Several major moments in English history played out at the Midlands' mightiest castle. **SPENCER MIZEN** explores the story-soaked stone walls, soaring towers and gloomy dungeons of the Kingmaker's lair

I had watched Richard III meet a bloody end at Bosworth, come face to face with a plague victim, stood in the shadow of a mighty trebuchet, and been put on trial for my life. And it was barely lunchtime.

The past millennium of British history has been a rollercoaster of war and famine, politics and pestilence. As I discovered, few locations capture that kaleidoscopic past more vividly than Warwick Castle. Walk through the imposing entrance into the tangle of towers, lofty walls, lakes and gardens, and you'll be confronted by reminders of this extraordinary story wherever you look.

In fact, Warwick Castle has frequently been at the centre of momentous events since at least 1068, when William the Conqueror built a motte-and-bailey fortification on a bend of the River Avon to deter any rebellion against Norman rule in the English Midlands.

The man charged with keeping an eye on those restive natives was Henry de Beaumont. In 1088, he was made Earl of Warwick, becoming the first in a long line of noblemen who continued to strengthen the bastion into an increasingly formidable power base.

The earls earned Henry II's gratitude by remaining loyal to his mother, Matilda, during the 12th-century Anarchy. Yet fidelity didn't always pay dividends. In the 1260s, during the Second Barons' War, the 8th Earl, William Mauduit, paid for his allegiance to Henry III when he was captured by rebel forces. In the words of one chronicler, rebel leader Simon de Montfort had the castle walls slighted "that it should be no strength to the king".

Warwick, though, is nothing if not resilient. The earldom reached its zenith two centuries

later under the stewardship of one of the most powerful men in England: the 16th Earl, Richard Neville – remembered as the 'Kingmaker' who schemed to make and break the careers of two English monarchs. By the time he assumed the earldom in 1449, the castle comprised a stone keep, gatehouse, barbican and large twin towers: Guy's and Caesar's. Climb those two and take in the view, as I did, and it soon becomes clear why, during Neville's tenure, the castle was considered one of the finest in England.

The 'Kingmaker' steered the course of English history twice during the Wars of the Roses: first, helping Yorkist Edward IV take the crown, then throwing in his lot with Edward's Lancastrian rival, Henry VI. It was an audacious piece of double-crossing – but it backfired spectacularly. On 14 April 1471, Neville lost his life at the battle of Barnet as Edward fought his way back to the throne.

There are a number of ways you can relive the events of the 15th century at Warwick. The most fast-paced sees a team of joustiers tell the story of the Wars of the Roses all the way through to Bosworth in the castle's tiltyard. If the sight of knights on the charge doesn't set your pulse racing, then a visit to the castle dungeons surely will. Here a cast of ghoulish characters – among them a plague doctor and a torturer – serve up a grisly vision of Warwick's medieval past.

I prefer my history a little more genteel – and since Richard Neville's demise, so has Warwick Castle. In the 17th century, it made the transition from military stronghold to country house and, though it continued to have brushes with great affairs of state (it came under royalist attack during the Civil War), its political influence gradually waned.

Its historical gravitas, though, has never ebbed. As any visitor will experience, nearly 10 centuries of British history are brought vividly to life within these mighty castle walls. **H**

// If the sight of knights on the charge doesn't set your pulse racing, a visit to the dungeons surely will //

Spencer Mizen is senior production editor on *BBC History Magazine*



For more information, head to warwick-castle.com



Caesar's and Guy's Towers were built in the 14th century during reconstruction of the castle, which was converted into a stately country house in the 17th century



The dungeons at Warwick Castle now host gruesome re-enactments of grisly episodes, featuring a plague doctor and a torturer



In 1068, William the Conqueror built a fortification at Warwick – a wooden motte-and-bailey castle like this one depicted in the Bayeux Tapestry



Jousts at the castle bring to life the story of the Wars of the Roses, with knights on horseback clashing noisily in the tilting yard



Bath in five places

In the Georgian era, Bath became arguably Britain's most fashionable destination.

KIRSTEN ELLIOTT promenades five historic highlights

1 Herschel Museum of Astronomy Stargazing and song

One Bath location that Jane Austen wrote about – criticising the houses as being too small – is New King Street. Come to number 19, in which several rooms recreate interiors in a typical 18th-century townhouse, and you'll see what she meant: even though some of these houses look quite big from the outside, actually they're quite compact inside.

A more positive reason to visit is to learn about the life and work of William Herschel. Bath was a great centre for the sciences and music, and German-born astronomer William was a proponent of both. Appointed organist of the Octagon chapel in Bath in 1766, he moved – along with his sister Caroline, also talented in both fields – to this house 11 years later. Here he ground glass to make his own telescopes, and it was peering through one of these from the garden on the night of 13 March 1781 that he discovered a new planet, Uranus.

You can roam his workshop and the music room where he tutored students, admiring period instruments, telescopes and globes.



The home of William Herschel, the German-born astronomy pioneer who discovered Uranus



2 Camden Crescent Trunk call

Building in Bath was always tricky. For a demonstration, walk to what is now Camden Crescent, originally called Camden Place, completed by 1796. It's fun to visit not only because it affords fabulous views across the city, but also because on the keystone over every doorway is a carving of an elephant's head. That motif was taken from the coat of arms of Sir Charles Pratt, 1st Earl Camden, an 18th-century lawyer and politician whose son served as Bath's MP. The stonemasons had never actually seen an elephant, so the results are hilarious.

View the whole crescent and you'll see that the north-eastern end is missing. That's down to the geology: underlying a lot of this land are unstable clays such as fuller's earth, with lots of water flowing through. Even before construction was completed, the site suffered a landslide and nine houses at the end of the terrace collapsed. For a long time that section was left as a romantic ruin – but then that fell down, too. So today it's an asymmetrical crescent – a kind of monument to the challenges of building in Bath.

3 Museum of Bath at Work Balls and beer

My favourite museum was originally an early sports centre when it opened in 1777, housing a 'real' (royal) tennis court. Eventually, like so many other enterprises, that failed, and other businesses moved in. At one point it was a malthouse. With so many visitors, Bath went though a lot of beer, and there were many breweries.

We tend to forget the different industries required to keep Bath going. One was JB Bowler's engineering and soft drinks factory on Avon Street. In 1969, when it closed, the contents were rescued, and in 1978, what was then the Camden Works Museum opened to display them. Contributions about other local companies followed, including Stothert & Pitt, which started out supplying ironmongery to 19th-century builders of Bath before becoming renowned for making cranes.

One interesting section is a recreation of a stone quarry – when you come to the city, you're admiring the distinctive, golden Bath stone.

Camden Crescent is a fine example of the ambition and challenge of building in Bath

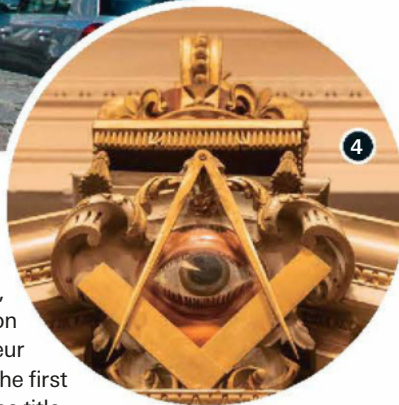


ALAMY

4 Freemasons' Hall See and be seen

The city's first real purpose-built venue, the St James Theatre, opened in 1750 on Old Orchard Street. In 1768, entrepreneur John Palmer obtained a royal patent – the first outside London – and the right to use the title 'Theatre Royal', staging performances by the likes of Sarah Siddons. Replaced by the current Theatre Royal on Beauford Square in 1805, the building became a Catholic chapel and then the Freemasons' Hall, dedicated in 1866.

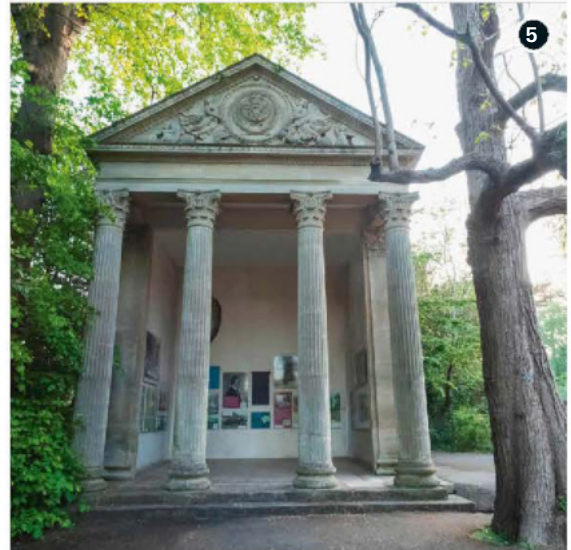
Guided tours are available, outlining the Freemasons' history and some of their symbols and rituals, as well as enabling you to admire remnants of the original venue. One surviving box overlooks the stage: when the theatre was in use, it was said that "it's not the play that people had come to see, it was others in the audience". A visit provides a glimpse of another aspect of life in Bath.



Take a tour of
Freemasons' Hall
to learn about the
history, practice
and symbology of
the organisation



Once a brewery, the
Museum of Bath at
Work shows many of
the enterprises that
kept the city running

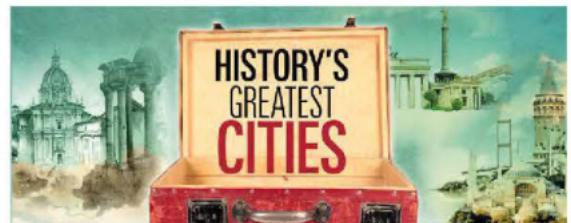


5 Sydney Gardens That's entertainment

The green swathe stretching behind the Sydney Hotel – now the Holburne Museum – is the last surviving Georgian pleasure garden in Britain, opened in 1795 as the Bath Vauxhall Gardens. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, it hosted public breakfasts, music and dancing, firework displays, evening galas and all sorts of other entertainments for fashionable visitors. Jane Austen, who lived for a time at 4 Sydney Place overlooking the gardens, was a frequent visitor.

In the early 19th century, the Kennet and Avon Canal was constructed through Sydney Gardens, and Brunel's railway arrived here around 1839. By then, the venue's popularity was already waning, as Bath's reputation became overshadowed by other resorts such as Brighton and Cheltenham. Two popular features, the labyrinth and grotto, were lost in 1853 when part of the garden was sold to build two houses. Today, this public park is again a lively place to promenade, admire the Temple of Minerva or enjoy a game of tennis. 

Kirsten Elliott is a historian, tour guide and author of more than a dozen books about Bath and the surrounding area, published by Akeman Press (akemanpress.com)



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CHRISTMAS QUIZ 2025

'Tis the season to test your knowledge of all things historical with our fiendish festive quiz

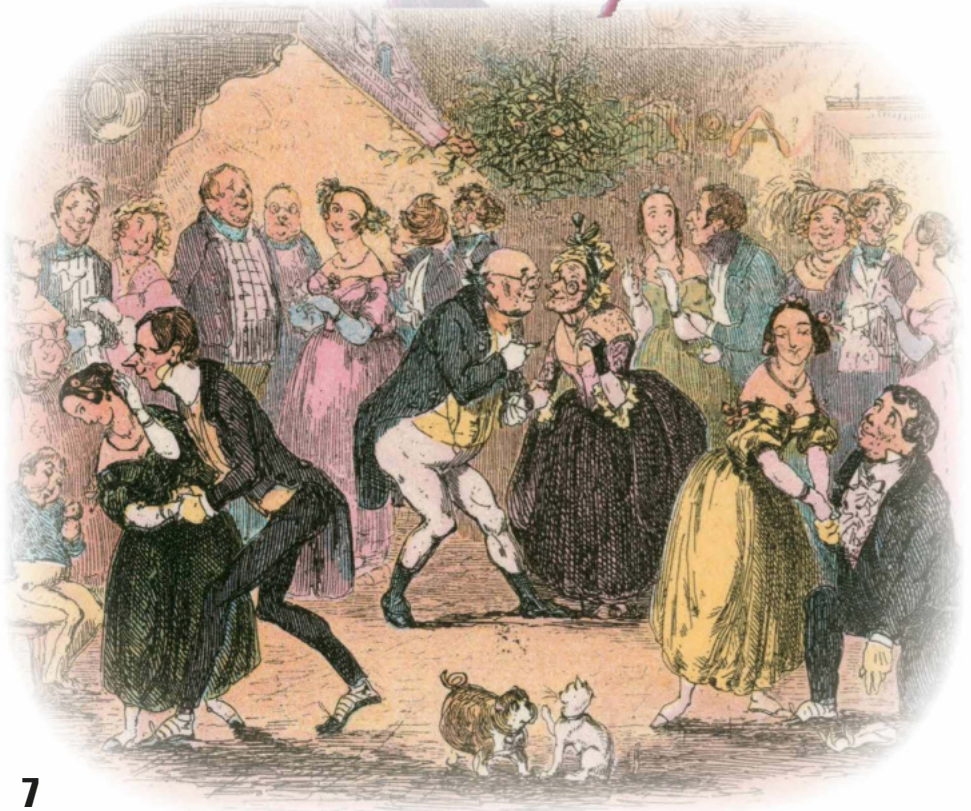
COMPILED BY **NICK RENNISON**

Festive names

1. Which 20th-century English barrister and judge was also a well-known Buddhist?
2. Which star of Hollywood's 'Golden Age' was born Ninnian Joseph Yule Jr in 1920?
3. What was notable about the English doctor and soldier Noel Chavasse?
 - a. He was the first medic to use penicillin on the battlefield
 - b. In 1924, he wrote a bestselling book about his service in the First World War
 - c. He was the only man to be awarded two Victoria Crosses during the First World War
4. Who held the record for the highest individual innings (189) in women's Test cricket between 1935 and 1986?
5. Whose most important work was a monumental sculpture known as the Well of Moses, created for a monastery near Dijon?
6. Which former German prince claimed he had never heard of a particular country before he was nominated to become its king?

Christmas in literature

7. In which novel, first published in 1836–37, does the central character spend Christmas Eve at Mr Wardle's?
8. What is unusual about the Christmas dinner in Laura Ingalls Wilder's book *The Long Winter*?
 - a. It consists entirely of nuts
 - b. It's eaten in May
 - c. It's shared with Native Americans
9. Which 16th/17th-century playwright wrote a Christmas masque in which



Christmas appears on stage followed by his 10 children, whose names include Carol, Minced-Pie and Wassail?

10. In Dorothy L Sayers' short story 'The Necklace of Pearls', where does Lord Peter Wimsey deduce the stolen pearls are?

- a. Hanging from the Christmas tree
- b. In a box of Christmas crackers
- c. Pinned to bunches of mistletoe

11. Which short story set at Christmas is narrated by a seven-year-old boy named Buddy?

12. Who wrote a children's poem in which King John (who "was not a good man") received "a big, red, india-rubber ball" for Christmas?

14. Who sang 'Here in My Heart', the UK's first Christmas number one, in 1952?

15. The artist John Callcott Horsley was responsible for which Christmas first?

a. Creating the first image of Santa Claus in a red suit

b. Designing the first Christmas card

c. Illustrating Dickens' Christmas story 'The Chimes'

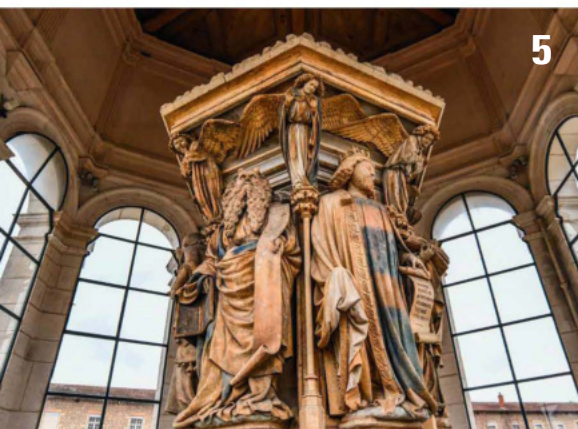
16. Who wrote the first Christmas Day message by a British monarch (George V), broadcast by the BBC in 1932?

17. For what Christmas first is the Italian hill town of Greccio known?

18. Which Christmas character first appeared in a booklet published by the Montgomery Ward department store in 1939?

Christmas firsts

13. What Christmas first did Carsten Borchgrevink and the crew of the *Southern Cross* achieve in 1899?





Baubles and decorations

19. To what was Oliver Cromwell referring when he said: "Take away that fool's bauble"?

20. Who wrote the poem beginning: "I heard the bells on Christmas Day/ Their old, familiar carols play"?

21. What is the name of the Victorian ballad about a bride who dies on her wedding day after accidentally trapping herself in an old wooden chest?

22. Which small town in Thuringia, Germany was famous in the 19th century for producing Christmas glass baubles?

23. Why are spiders and their webs

common Christmas tree decorations in Poland?

a. A folk tale describes a spider spinning a web to keep the newborn Jesus warm

b. A well-known Polish poem tells of a family so poor that they had to use spiders' webs instead of tinsel

c. The narrator of a novel by 19th-century writer Henryk Sienkiewicz sees a spider spinning its web on his Christmas tree

24. What Christmas honour do Daley Thompson, Esther Rantzen, Terry Wogan and the Spice Girls all have in common?

Who said (or wrote) that?

25. "Santa Claus has the right idea: visit people only once a year"

26. "Up, my wife to the making of Christmas pies all day... and I abroad to several places"

27. "It being Christmas Eve, there was, as I had foreseen, a good deal of revelry and what not"

28. "At Christmas I no more desire a rose / Than wish a snow in May's new-fangled mirth"

29. "To perceive Christmas through its wrapping becomes more difficult with every year"

30. Whose Christmas Day 1945 diary entry read: "By keeping the children in bed for long periods we managed to have a tolerable day"?





39. What did Piero de Medici commission Michelangelo to make in the winter of 1494?
40. Which religious figure did the 19th-century artist Bernhard Plockhorst depict surrounded by his family on Christmas Eve?
41. Which painting by Caravaggio was stolen from an oratory in Palermo in 1969?
42. Who painted *Merry Christmas, Grandma... We Came in Our New Plymouth*?

The past in the news 2025

43. What did recent research on a Roman gladiator's skeleton, unearthed in York, reveal?
44. A previously unknown song by which English composer was recently discovered in a Worcestershire archive?
45. In March, where did a couple unexpectedly unearth the gravestone of Sextus Congenius Verus, a second-century Roman sailor?
a. New Orleans
b. New Delhi
c. New Zealand
46. Which Jamaican-born broadcaster, writer and campaigner was honoured in March with the unveiling of a blue plaque on her former home?
47. What did Harvard Law Library once believe was a copy that is now thought to be an original?
48. Where are the two murals by William Hogarth that were recently opened to the public after a £9.5m restoration project? **H**

It's a gift

31. Who wrote to Abraham Lincoln: "I beg to present you, as a Christmas gift, the city of Savannah"?
32. Which French anthropologist wrote an influential 1925 essay entitled 'The Gift'?
33. For Christmas 1841, Queen Victoria gave Prince Albert a specially commissioned portrait of *Eos*. Who or what was *Eos*?
34. Who wrote in his diaries: "I'm giving everyone framed underwear for Christmas"?
35. Who sent Harpo Marx a Christmas present of a harp with barbed wire strings?

36. In Gian Carlo Menotti's 1951 opera *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, what gift does the disabled child Amahl offer to the Christ-child?

A Christmas exhibition

37. Which artist painted *Nursery (Christmas Stockings)*?

38. In Piero della Francesca's *Nativity*, painted in the early 1480s and now displayed in London's National Gallery, what musical instruments are two of the angels playing?



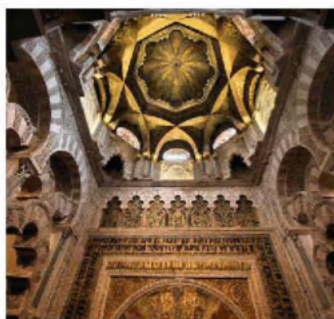
34

Quiz answers

- Who said (or wrote) that?**
25. Victor Borge 26. Samuel Pepys
27. Bertie Wooster in the PG Wodehouse story 'Jeeves and the Vile-Tide Spirit' 28. Browne in *Yule-Tide Spirit*
29. EB White 30. Evelyn Waugh
31. General William T. Sherman
32. Marcel Mauss 33. Albert's favourite greyhound 34. Albert's
35. It's a gift
36. Warhol 37. Salvador Dalí 38. His crutch – after offering it, he finds he no longer needs it
39. A snowman 40. Martin Luther 41. *Nativity with St Francis and St Lawrence* – it has never been recovered
42. Norman Rockwell
43. That he had been wounded by a lion's bite 44. Henry Purcell
45. a. New Orleans 46. Una Marson
47. Edward I's version of Magna Carta from 1300 48. St Bartholomew's Hospital, London
A Christmas exhibition
1. Christmas Hummerys
2. Mickey Rooney 3. c. He was the only man to be awarded two Victoria Crosses during the First World War
4. Betty Snowball 5. Claus Sluter
6. King Carol I of Romania
7. *The Pickwick Papers* 8. b. It's eaten off from supplies on 25 December
9. Ben Jonson 10. c. Pinned to bunches of mistletoe 11. 'A Christmas Jesus warm' 24. All switched on the Christmas lights in Oxford Street
23. a. A folk tale describes a spider spinning a web to keep the newly born
20. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
19. The parliamentary mace
18. Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer
17. First living Nativity scene (created by Saint Francis of Assisi in 1223)
16. Rudyard Kipling
15. b. Designing the first Christmas card
14. Al Martino
13. First celebrations on Antarctica
Christmas firsts
12. AA Milne
11. 'A Christmas Memory' by Truman Capote
10. c. Pinned to bunches of mistletoe
9. Ben Jonson
8. b. It's eaten off from supplies on 25 December
7. *The Pickwick Papers*
6. King Carol I of Romania
5. Claus Sluter
4. Betty Snowball
3. c. He was the only man to be awarded two Victoria Crosses during the First World War
2. Mickey Rooney
1. Christmas Hummerys
Festive names

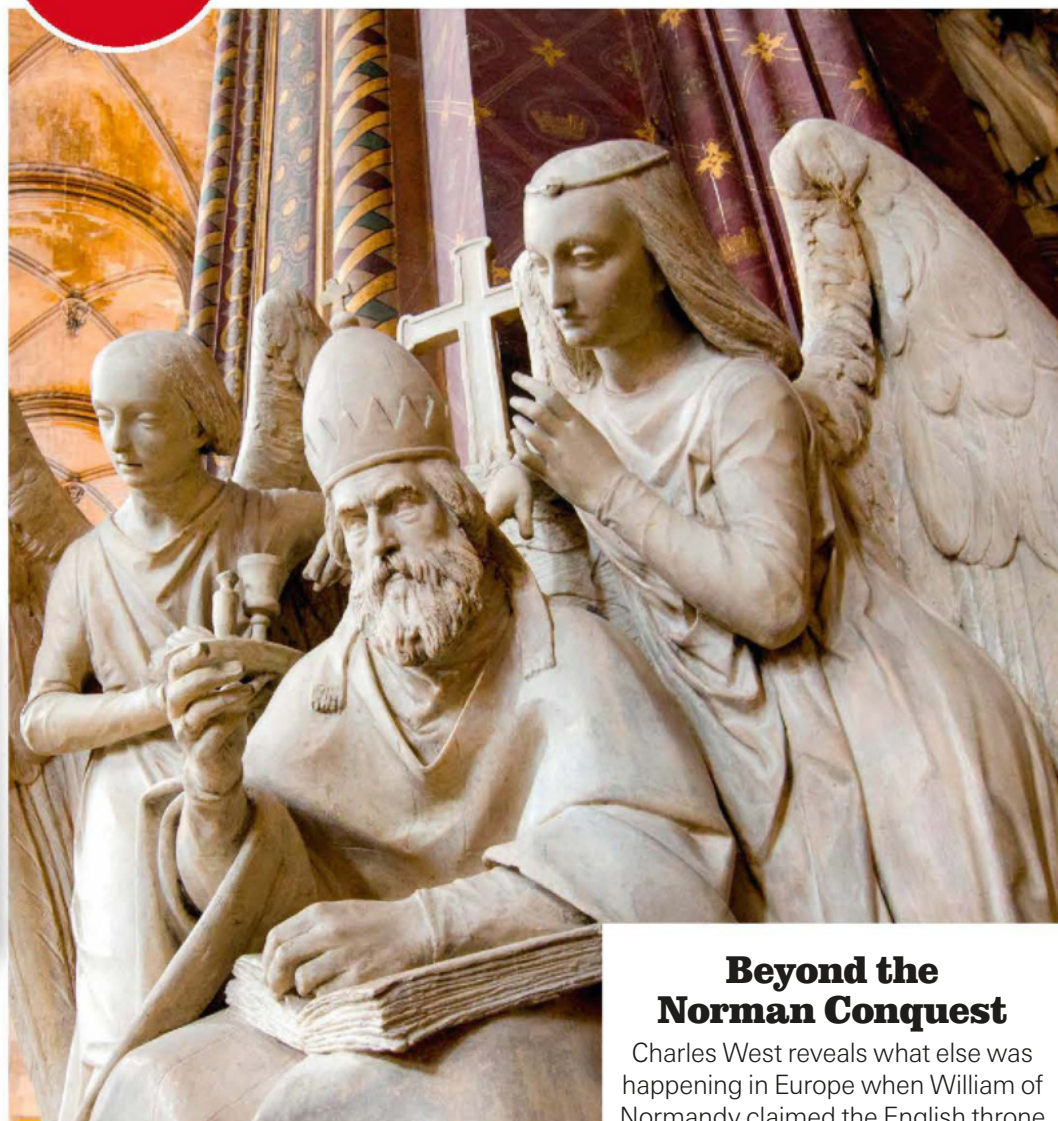


DREAMSTIME/GETTY IMAGES/ALAMY



Europe's Islamic pioneers

Tharik Hussain reflects on how Muslims have shaped the continent for 1,400 years



Beyond the Norman Conquest

Charles West reveals what else was happening in Europe when William of Normandy claimed the English throne



No more SAS?

Gavin Mortimer on why the organisation's future hung in the balance after WWII

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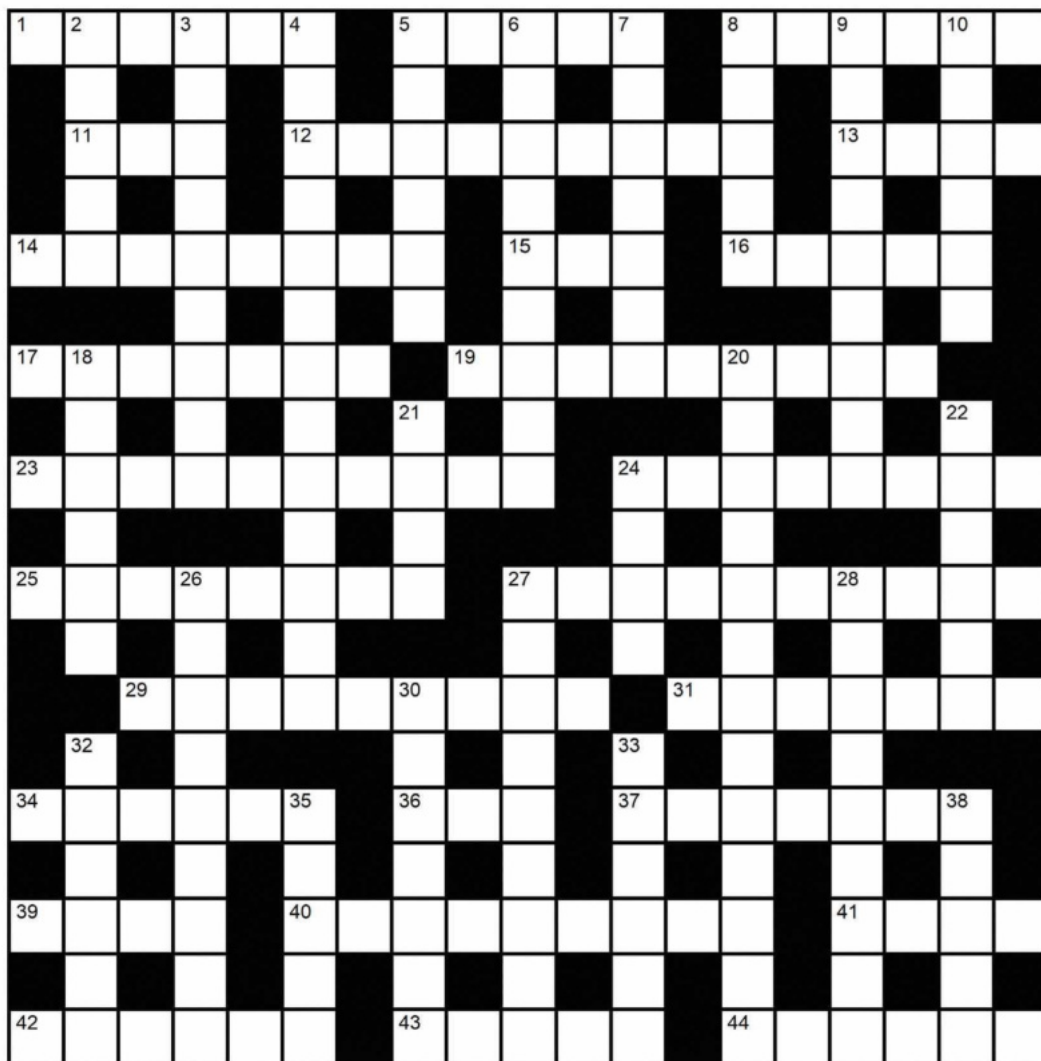
Medieval vampire panics

John Blair explains why many 12th-century Britons lived in fear of the dead in their midst

PRIZE CROSSWORD

Across

- 1** UK tabloid newspaper founded in Manchester in 1909, merged with the *Daily Mail* in 1971 (6)
5 China enforced its long-held claim over this territory in 1950 (5)
8 Tokugawa ____, founder of Japan's last shogunate in 1603 (6)
11/10/30 Police force established in the mid-18th century, precursor of Scotland Yard (3,6,7)
12 Broad term for a descendant of the Jewish patriarch Jacob (9)
13 Co-author of *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) (4)
14 British monarch who was the first head of the Commonwealth (6,2)
15 Chittaranjan ____, founder of the Swaraj ('Self rule') party in Bengal (3)
16 The battle of Patay (1429) was a major success for the French in Joan of Arc's ____ Campaign (5)
17 English courts of law from around the 12th century until the reforms of 1971 (7)
19 These vessels were used, famously, to scatter the Spanish Armada fleet in August 1588 (9)
23/26 He was crowned king on Christmas Day in Westminster Abbey (7,3,9)
24 Trade route, used by Marco Polo, linking western Europe with China (4,4)
25 Region between the Caspian and Black Seas, scene of fighting between the Russian and Ottoman empires (1914–17) (8)
27 Antibiotic, accidentally discovered by Alexander Fleming in 1928 (10)
29 Her account of hiding from the Nazis in a secret annexe in Amsterdam has become a wartime classic (4,5)
31 HMS *Vanguard* (launched 1994) was the first British submarine designed to carry this missile type (7)
34 Elizabeth ('Bessie') ____, mother of Henry VIII's son, Henry Fitzroy (6)
36 One of Napoleon's marshals who fought at Waterloo, executed in December 1815 (3)
37 Greek shipping magnate who married Jackie Kennedy in 1968 (7)
39 First name of the matinee idol and composer of the Second World War song 'We'll Gather Lilacs' (4)
40 They started to be built by British wealthy homeowners in the 17th century to preserve foods and chill drinks throughout the year (9)
41 Popular name for the major US motor-car race inaugurated in 1911 (4)
42 Major deity of ancient Egypt, often depicted as partially mummified and green-skinned (6)



- 43** Erik ____, French composer who had a major influence on French 20th-century music (5)
44 Historian and TV presenter, author of a three-volume *History of Britain* (6)

Down

- 2** College named after the 19th-century clergyman who led the Oxford Movement that resulted in the development of Anglo-Catholicism (5)
3 Area of London in which high-status individuals, including Sir Thomas More, were executed (5,4)
4 The last emperor of Ethiopia, deposed in 1974 (5,8)
5 English robber, much romanticised, hanged near York in 1739 (6)



Which trade route was followed from Europe to China by Marco Polo, shown receiving a passport from Kublai Khan in a 15th-century illustration? (24 across)



What antibiotic did bacteriologist Alexander Fleming discover by accident in 1928? (27 across)

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Solution to our November 2025 crossword

Across 1 Diaries 5 Poison 10 Ghana 11 Roget 12 Gow 13 Messalina 15/1D Vasco Da Gama 16 Istria 17 Warhol 21 Ashoka 22 Helium 24 Cabot 26 Kim Il-sung 27 Odo 28 Ellis Island 30 Tuscany 31 Napier.

Down 2 Adam Smith 3 IRA 4 Sardinia 6 Octavia Hill 7 Sagas 8 New World 9 Ogham 14 Antikythera 18 Hammurabi 19 Bancroft 20 Beamish 23 Agadir 25 Boots 26 Kelly 29 Ska.

Four winners of The Mirror of Great Britain
Frances Matthew, Beckenham; Karen Houghton, Laxey; Andrew Wilson, Hyde; Gail Treliving, Durham



What vessels did the British deploy to great effect against the Spanish Armada in 1588? (19 across)



In which campaign spearheaded by Joan of Arc did the battle of Patay end in a victory for French forces? (16 across)

6 Term often used for the poverty-stricken people queueing for food in the Great Depression (9)

7 Town on the Adriatic, once the most significant port of the Austro-Hungarian empire (7)

8 The first ____ Home Exhibition was opened by Lord Northcliffe in 1908 as a publicity drive for the *Daily Mail* (5)

9 War against Israel initiated by Egypt and Syria in 1973, timed to coincide with a Jewish holiday (3,6)

10 See 11 across

18 Island captured by the US in 1944, and used as a base for air attacks on mainland Japan (6)

20 Ancient city of Anatolia, site of a mausoleum that was one of the Seven Wonders of the World (13)

21 Elisha ____, American inventor of the safety elevator (4)

22 The ____ Scheme, a costly, unsuccessful venture in the late 1690s to establish a Scottish colony in Panama (6)

24 Multinational corporation, founded in 1946 as a Tokyo telecoms engineering company (4)

26 See 23 across

27 Prepaid carrier service, the basis of modern mail services, introduced by Rowland Hill in 1840 (5,4)

28 Township under siege by the Boers in

1899/1900, along with Kimberley and Mafeking (9)

30 See 11 across

32 Fifth/sixth-century Merovingian king who united the Franks under one rule (6)

33 North African city on the site of Hadrumetum, an ancient Phoenician colony (6)

35 Men's formal wear evolving in the 18th century from the riding habit (5)

38 One of the biblical 'cities of the plain', usually paired with another (5)

Compiled by **Eddie James**



Jackie Kennedy married which Greek magnate? (37 across)

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MY HISTORY HERO

Fashion designer **Zandra Rhodes** chooses

Adel Rootstein

1930–92



Adel Rootstein pictured in 1971, surrounded by her mannequins. "She was like an angel – albeit one with claws," recalls Zandra Rhodes

IN PROFILE

Born in South Africa to Russian parents, Adel Rootstein became arguably the leading British mannequin designer from the late 1950s onwards. She revolutionised mannequin design and played a key behind-the-scenes role in the London fashion scene of the 'swinging sixties', founding the successful mannequin company Rootstein with her husband, industrial designer Richard Hopkins. She died in London at the age of 62.

// She was a great talent-spotter – she spotted the potential in Twiggy's elfin look – and could identify a trend before it hit the streets //



Zandra Rhodes is one of the UK's leading fashion designers. The paperback of her book *Iconic: My Life in Fashion in 50 Objects* (Penguin) is out now

When did you first hear about Adel Rootstein? When she turned up at the front door of my little design studio near Paddington Station in London in 1969, following my first fashion collection. She'd tracked me down, wanting some dresses of mine for the mannequins in the showroom she'd just opened in Golden Square, Soho. It was the start of a lifelong friendship.

What kind of woman was she? She was a petite, mousy-looking woman, wore her brown hair in a bob, and spoke with a slight South African accent. But for all her sweetness, she was incredibly tough – you crossed her at your peril. She'd been a window dresser in the West End, but back then there was nothing much to show dresses on, just ordinary dummies – lumps of plaster – which looked awful. So she decided to make her own mannequins. Her father was a rabbi, but I don't think she was a practising Jew. However, when she died she left money to a Sephardic cemetery on the Fulham Road.

What made her a hero? She was the most amazing woman I've ever met. She had the strength of Frida Kahlo and was one of those people who just make things happen. She and her husband started producing their handcrafted mannequins, using the latest fibreglass technology, in a small Soho workshop before moving to bigger premises.

She was a great talent-spotter, too – she immediately realised the potential in Twiggy's elfin look – and could identify a trend before it hit the streets. She also supported me through thick and thin when my business wasn't doing too well in the early days, even lending me money. She was like an angel – albeit one with claws.

What was her finest hour? It has to be the legacy of the amazing mannequins she created that made outfits and dresses just come to life – she transformed the shop windows of the 1970s and 80s. She modelled her mannequins on everyone from Twiggy to Sandie Shaw – even Joan Collins before *Dynasty* revived her flagging fame. At its peak, Adel's company employed 200 people, and the factory she set up produced 6,000 mannequins a year, exported worldwide. They are now collectors' items; if you're lucky, you can pick up one for £300 – I recently purchased a couple myself on eBay.

Can you see any parallels between her life and your own? We both made our careers in the fashion world, and her strength of character and generosity of spirit helped carry me through the tough times. So I'd like to help ensure that she's remembered in her own special way. Her death left a great hole in my life.

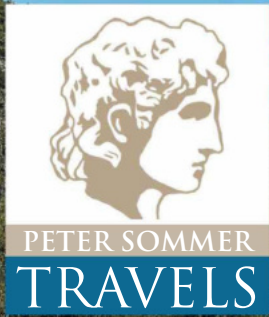
What would you say if you could meet her now? I'd thank her for all she did for me – she was so instrumental in my career, and helped me become what I became. I can never thank her enough. **H**

Zandra Rhodes was talking to York Membery



In the BBC Radio 4 series **Great Lives**, guests discuss inspirational figures: bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qxs8





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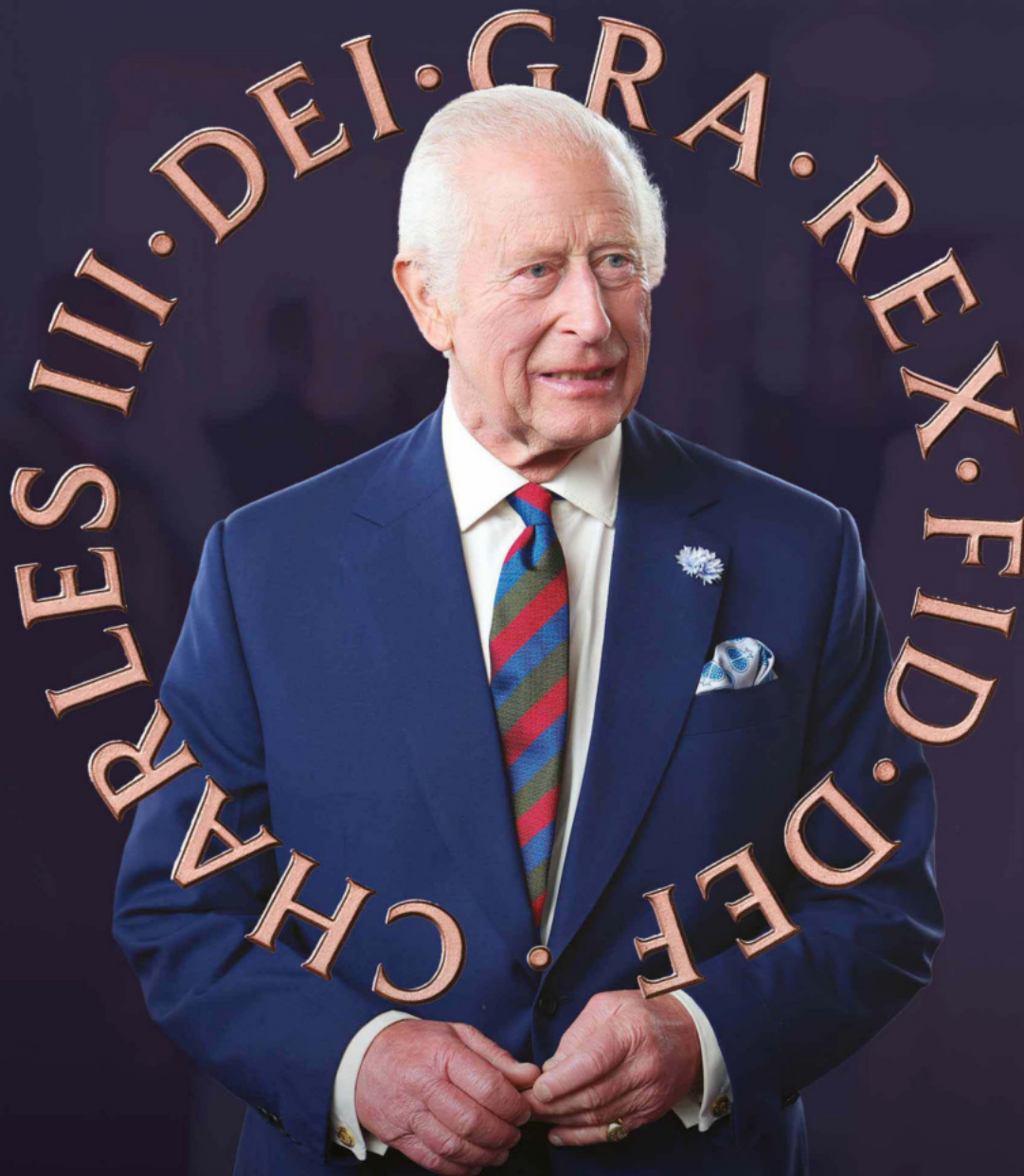
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